

# interzone

MAY 1999

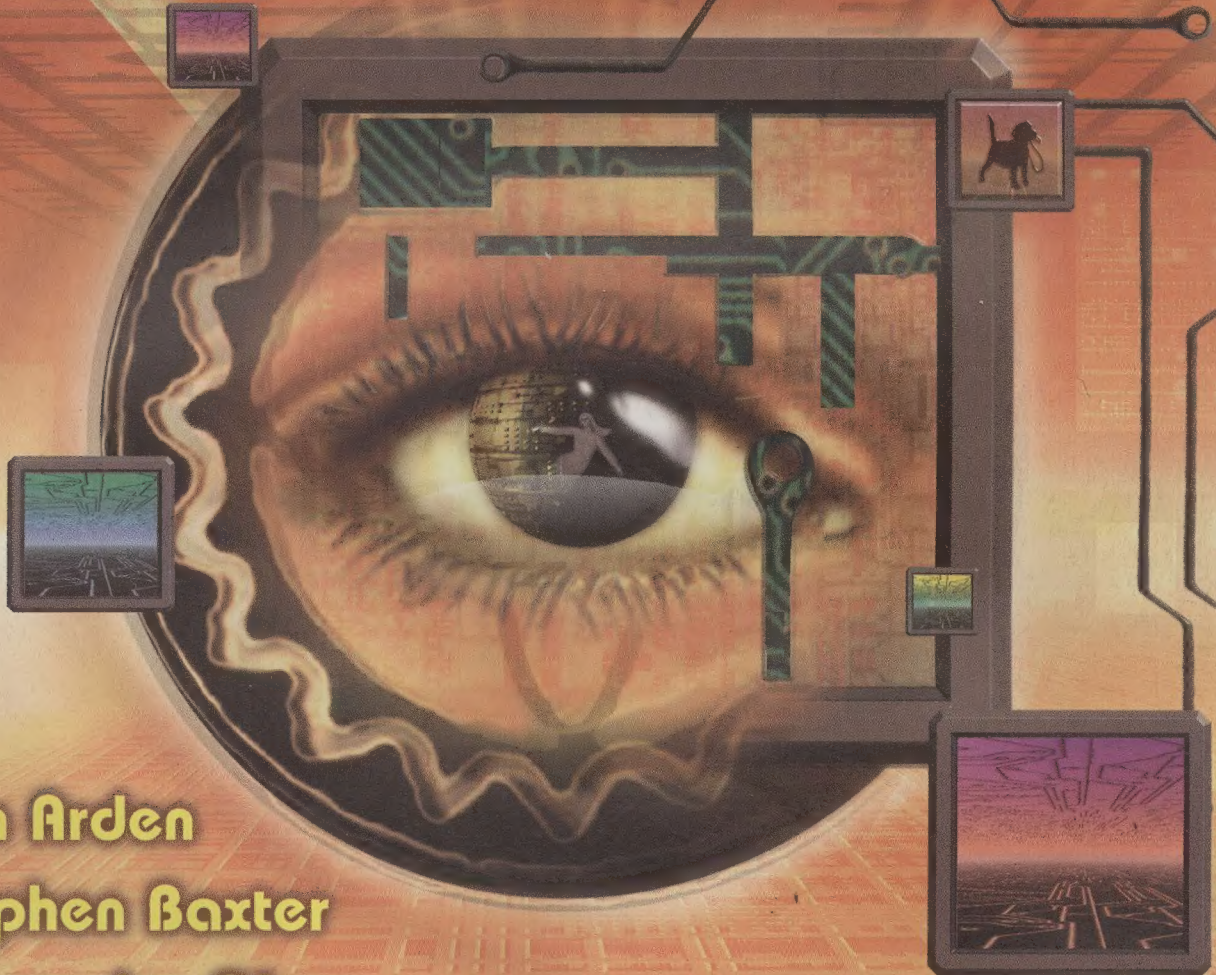
Number 143

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## 'Three-Legged Dog'

Ian Watson



Tom Arden

Stephen Baxter

Alexander Glass

Paul McAuley

+ JON COURTENAY GRIMWOOD, DON WEBB and more



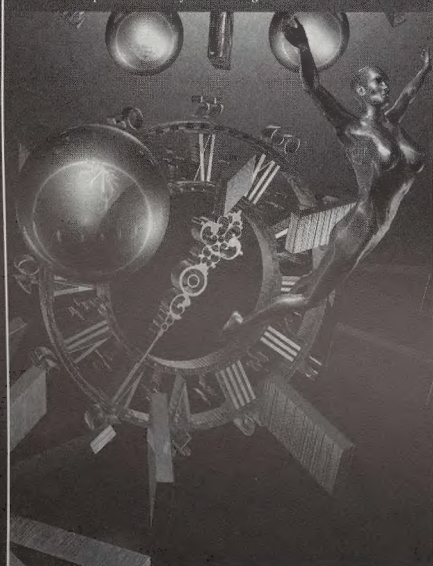
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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

MAY 1999

Number 143

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**Cover by Dominic Harman for "Three-Legged Dog"**

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# INTERFACE



Greece and Portugal, two relatively small countries situated at opposite ends of southern Europe, may have a number of qualities in common, but two things in particular strike us. Both nations have a tremendous place, out of all proportion to their size, in world history – one stretching back more than 3,000 years, to the dawn of western civilization, the other much more recent, but of great significance in the spread of that same civilization (for better or worse) around the entire globe.

The second common factor, of more immediate relevance to readers of this magazine, is that neither country has an entry in the authoritative *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993), edited by Peter Nicholls and John Clute. If you want to find out a little about science-fiction writing in, say, Romania or the Arabic-speaking countries or Japan, you can turn to relevant entries in that excellent encyclopedia; but for Greece and Portugal there is nothing to be found. No doubt they were accidental omissions of the sort which occur, understandably, in the task of pushing to completion a volume of more than a million words; but in the six years since the book's appearance the absence of entries on those two countries has come to seem ironic – precisely because there has been so much sf activity in both Greece and Portugal during the 1990s.

The following short pieces, which can be viewed as "Letters from Greece and Portugal" in place of our usual readers' letters, may serve to redress the balance slightly.

David Pringle

## Science Fiction in Greece

The first Greeks to write science-fiction novels were Demosthenes Voutiras (1871-1958) and Petros Pikros (1895-1956), both radical pioneers with successful careers. Their innovations jolted the mainstream literary scene. Voutiras published his first novel, *From Earth to Mars* (*Apo ti Gi ston Ari*), in 1929, and his second, *Counterfeit Cultures* (*Kalpikoi Politismoi*), in 1934. Pikros launched the Hellenic social-sf novel for young adults with his books *Man is Flying, Flying!* (*Petaei, Petaei o Anthropos!*) in 1931 and *From the World Departing to the World That's Coming* (*Apo ton Kosmo pou Fevgei ston Kosmo pou Erxetai*) in 1933. Unfortunately, conservative societies tend to bury progressive writers in oblivion after their deaths, and that was the fate of both Voutiras and Pikros. But obscurity and neglect did not deter other Greeks from writing sf in the following decades, even if the ghetto walls were really challenged only in the 1990s.

The global success of Anglophone science fiction in the second half of the 20th century and the publication of major sf works in translation in the last three decades in Greece have encouraged contemporary writers to try their skills in the field of fantastic literature. In the 1970s and 1980s, attempts were also made to launch Greek magazines and fanzines in order to establish a forum of communication among scattered Greek fans and to provide an outlet for fledgling authors. The early magazines and fanzines no longer in circulation included *Andromeda* (1977), *Nova* (1978, two new issues appeared in 1993), *Quark* (1985), *Eso-teriko Diastima* (1989) and *Apagorevmenos Planitis* (1987-90). New attempts were made in the 1990s: the fanzines *Cyborg* (1990-93) and *Choro-chronos* (1994), and the magazine *Pleiades* (1995-97). In 1996 *Apagorevmenos Planitis* was revived and is currently the best professional sf magazine in Greece. A new fanzine titled *Big Bang* appeared in 1997 and has reached at least five issues.

The increased production of both foreign and Hellenic sf gave the genre visibility and strengthened the ties among publishers, editors, writers, translators and fans. The next logical step was the formation of local clubs. In 1995, the "Hellenic Society of the Fantastic" was formed in Thessaloniki. One of its most successful activities was the dramatization of works by Bradbury, Maupassant, Lovecraft and Hoffmann. The presentation took place on 8th February 1996, with the

participation of professional actresses. Musician Petros Theodorou composed an original score accompanied by special effects just for the occasion.

On Sunday 13th April 1997 at the initiative of Nikos Theodorou, a civil engineer, 17 individuals met and decided to form their own local club at Ioannina. After the necessary preliminaries, "The Fantastic Society of Ioannina" became a legal entity and almost immediately it began organizing talks, readings, lectures and film showings. One of its most ambitious projects was the organization of a symposium on sf: nine guests (writers, translators, scholars) were invited to speak on various topics relevant to Hellenic science fiction, on 1st November 1998. An exhibition in the Zosimaia Library of Ioannina, co-sponsor of the symposium, of original Greek novels, magazines and posters accompanied the event. Recently, translator Christodoulos Litharis has been in contact with many sf fans and writers residing in Athens, and preparations towards establishing an Athenian sf club are under way.

To promote the writing of sf and render visible the small group of aspiring Greek authors, the publisher of the Greek sf magazine *Pleiades* and its editorial staff (calling themselves "The Fantastic Argonauts") decided to institute an award, to be voted on by secret ballot. The establishment of the **Ikaromenippos Award** was announced in the second issue of *Pleiades* (1995). The name of the award is a tribute to Lucian of Samosata, whom The Fantastic Argonauts regard as the "father" of Hellenic sf (the second-century A.D. Syrian-Greek writer best known to English-language readers for his "True History," but also author of the humorous dialogue "Icaromenippus," in which the cynic philosopher Menippus visits the moon – DP). The categories established were: 1) first and second prizes for the best sf novel; 2) first and second prizes for the best sf short story; 3) a prize for the best new voice in fantastic literature; and 4) an honorary award for a publisher or other individual to acknowledge their contributions to the promotion of sf. The first Ikaromenippos Awards were given in a formal ceremony in Athens in May 1996, and the winners were:

- Konstantinos Romosios for his novel *Messianic Empire* (first prize)
- Dionysis Kalamvrezos for his novel *The Disease and the Flower of Lotus* (second prize)
- Anthippi Fiamou for her fantasy novel *Bright Moons on the River of Lethe* (best new voice)
- Makis Panorios for his story "Actor" (first prize)
- Dionysis Kalamvrezos for his story "You're Watching the Programme"

*Amphitheatre*,” and Kyriakos Athanasiades for his story “Punishment” (second prize, tie).

The second annual ceremony of the Ikaromenippos Awards took place in June 1997, and about 150 people attended. The Fantastic Argonauts, obviously influenced by the successful American television series *Hercules*, decided to add one more award to the list. The new award was named the “Heraklis,” after the legendary ancient Greek hero, and is intended to honour the Greek sf or fantasy novel which best utilizes Greek mythology and history. The winners were:

Michalis Antonopoulos for his novel *Hyperborea: The Struggle Against Shadows* (first prize, plus the Heraklis Award)

Dionysis Papadopoulos for his novel *Planet of Revenge* (second prize)

Thanasis Vembos for his story “The Children of Saturn” (first prize)

Dimitres Vanellis for his story “The Dragon’s Tooth,” and Yiogos Pavlides for his story “The Weapon” (second prize, tie)

Yiorgos Bazines for his contributions to the Greek sf scene as publisher of the magazine *Apagorevmenos Planitis* and a pocket-size book series called “In Orbit” (honorary award).

Seeing that many sf enthusiasts welcomed the Ikaromenippos Awards and were inspired to pen novels or contribute stories to local sf magazines and fanzines, The Fantastic Argonauts decided to add yet another award in 1998. With a record of nine novels and numerous short stories published in 1997, there was room to add a third prize. On 17th June 1998 the awards were given to:

Konstantinos Romosios for the second part of his “Messianic Empire” trilogy, *Fire Walks with Me* (first prize, plus the Heraklis Award)

Stavros Mountoufaris for his novel *Dreams of Centuries* (second prize)

Hero Yiannopoulou for her novel *And the Sphinx Smiled* (third prize)

In the category of short story Stavroula Ventouri received first prize for “The Passenger,” and Helias Toliadis second prize for “Nightbattle.” Tied in third place were the stories “Dreams” by Dimitres Vanellis and “The Fairy’s Tale” by Vasilis Karakitsos.

**Domna Pastourmatzi**

**Editor:** ...and no doubt a fourth set of Greek awards, those for 1999, will be announced shortly. The Ikaromenippos Award strikes me as perhaps the most perfectly-named in the history of sf. *Lucian’s portmanteau word evokes both the mythical Icarus, who flew too close to the sun on the artificial wings made by his father, Daedalus, and, of course, the cynic Menippus, who was the stepfather of “Menippean Satire” (a recognized literary term since*

*Roman times*). *Sf, one could argue, as it has come down to us via the utopianists of the Renaissance (who read Lucian to a man) and via Jonathan Swift to H. G. Wells, is precisely an “icaro-menippean” literature. A new/old term for sf, everybody? Icaromenippean Fiction? But, sadly, it’s unlikely to catch on outside Greece...*

## At Last, a Nobel Prize for Portugal!

*To preface the following brief piece by Antonio de Macedo (a Portuguese film-maker who has directed some sf and fantasy features, such as The Magic Springs of Gerenia [1983], The Emissaries from Khalom [1987] and The Curse of Marialva [1990], as well as a writer of sf/f, with several published novels and many stories in magazines and anthologies) I should remind everyone that the eminent Portuguese novelist Jose Saramago (born 1922), won the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature. In a belated review of Saramago’s novel Blindness (1995; translated into English 1997), in Locus #455, December 1998, the American sf critic Gary K. Wolfe had this to say: “Blindness... is a straightforward apocalyptic fantasy that offers a startlingly grim view of human nature, and (for sf readers at least) more closely recalls mid-period Ballard (in his High-Rise mode) than any of the more lyrical magic realists to whom Saramago (by virtue, mostly, of his Iberian origins) might occasionally get compared... Its characters are real, and the treatment of their affliction [a mysterious plague of blindness – DP] worked out in the kind of realistic detail more characteristic of fantasy or sf than of existential satires: there is more of Ballard or Golding here than of Ionesco or Beckett. With its flashes of unexpected lyricism... and its hard look at the fragile fabric of civilized behaviour, Blindness offers substantial enough rewards to make you wonder if the Nobel committee is onto something for once.”*

**David Pringle**

It is bizarre that a language like Portuguese, with around 200 million speakers throughout the world, and with literary giants on the scale of Aquilino Ribeiro or Fernando Pessoa, in Portugal, or Joaquim Machado de Assis and Joao Guimaraes Rosa, in Brazil, had to wait until the end of the 20th century in order to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, when it was sufficient to be Winston Churchill (with all respect for that great hero of World War II) in order to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature after writ-

ing his memoirs – not to mention more obscure authors who received the Nobel and were never heard of again.

Whether Jose Saramago is the most “Nobel-worthy” living Portuguese author is doubtful – why not, for example, Sofia de Mello Breyner? – but Saramago is indisputably a great author whether one likes him or not (I find him excessively depressive and pessimistic). I appreciate him in my capacity as an author of science fiction and fantasy because he is a meticulous observer of the human condition, with the marvellous surprise of someone who has just arrived from Sirius, but I particularly appreciate him as an author who is very close to speculative fiction. For example, his novel *Blindness* (1995), in which all the characters are suddenly struck blind due to a mysterious phenomenon, reminds one of *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham, but it goes much further, uncovering terrible and unforeseen aspects within the byways of human cruelty. Some of Saramago’s books, such as *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1982) or *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), possess the magical force of paintings by Brueghel or Hieronymus Bosch. His novel *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1989) is a good example of alternative history: in 1147, in reality, the Portuguese king Afonso Henriques only managed to conquer Lisbon from the Moors because he was helped by thousands of German, Scots, Flemish and English crusaders, who docked in Lisbon on the way to the Holy Land, but Saramago’s book deals with the hypothesis of an altered timeline – what would the history of Portugal have been like if the crusaders had not helped King Afonso?

Even before receiving the Nobel Prize, Saramago was by far the biggest-selling author in contemporary Portuguese literature, although many of those who bought his books may not have read them all the way through, as they think his work is so heavy. He was fine as a gift for birthdays or at Christmas! Once a female relative of mine had a birthday, and a few days previously Saramago’s *The Stone Raft* had been published – another good example of sf: the central idea is that the Iberian Peninsula becomes separated from Europe at the Pyrenees, and drifts off into the Atlantic. I decided to give her a copy, and when she unwrapped it she exclaimed disappointedly: “It’s the third one I’ve received today!”

**Antonio de Macedo**

**Editor:** for more about Portuguese sf, see the listing in this issue’s “Books Received” of the anthology *Frontiers*, edited by Maria Augusta and Antonio de Macedo.

# Three-Legged Dog



Ian Watson

**S**o I come into existence again.

Like a sleeper awaking, like a patient emerging from anaesthesia. The world out of focus. This

clarifies quickly. I'm almost getting used to coming back to life. This is the fourth time.

There's Matthew slouching along ten yards ahead of

me. Sun-bright pavement's crowded. Blokes in shirt-sleeves, girls in short skirts and halter tops, heatwave. Can't miss Matthew's tight little ponytail and big bald patch. Turned-up jacket collar and knotted silk scarf hide the mulberry blotch of birthmark down the left side of his neck – too sweaty for a polo-neck today, eh Matthew?

Shops, bank branches: we're in Royal Leamington Spa, heading down the Parade. There's the grand red-brick and sandy-stone Town Hall and the bleach-white statue of Queen Victoria which a German bomb shifted one inch sideways on its plinth over half a century ago, but Matthew is the focus of my attention, the centre.

Toddler-buggies, fat woman in a powered wheelchair, trainer-girl walking a guide dog, a Sikh family, traveller couple with tattoos and piercings: the girl sports bright blue hair and a pea-size green bead under her lower lip, the bloke has a metal spike through the top of his nose as well as eyebrow-rings. The crowding's good. Helps me keep my distance from Matthew, as if I'm genuinely following him through a press of people. I am, I am – he's my energy source. Me, a moth emerging from nothingness and only existing because of his light, unless I fly too close and he flares, disintegrating me again.

Cars, cars. Kids with balloons straggling up the Parade, and lots more New Age types. Could be the day of the annual Peace Festival down in the park by the Pump Room. Could well be.

I'm a sort of invisible human balloon myself, bobbing along. Balloon without any skin, just the presence of myself. Intangible, proceeding through the gaps between people, bump bump but they don't know this.

Come back to life, have I? Not to my own life, not to the life of Amanda Riley – but to *his* life, Matthew's. This time I must try my best to hover on his periphery, resisting the attraction towards him yet sustained by his life, his continuing, ongoing life. Light of my life – there's a joke. Definitely the light of my death – *which I think he caused deliberately*.

He's hesitating outside the Tripe & Tipple pub. We've been in there together from time to time – is that why he's in two minds instead of marching right on in? Guest ales, Toulouse Lautrec posters, and chef's specials of liver and onions, braised kidneys (which they don't bother to core before cooking), and tripe à la mode de Caen, as well as the usual baguettes stuffed with prawns or ham. Triple-tipple, in Matthew's case, but he always drove safely afterwards – no, that's unfair, he would only down two and a half pints. Something to dilute the cranberry-flavoured vodka when he got home.

Out comes a red softpack. Burnt offering. Consult the smoke. Thinking things over, eh Matthew? To tipple or not to tipple before touring the Peace Festival, presumed reason for presence in Leamington on this fine day. Score a month's supply of what it amuses you to call dry ice – the cracky sort, right? Keeps you alert while writing UNIX process software, compression algorithms, billing software, data fill for some new mobile phone company or some paltry share-ware to be stuck

as a CD on the front of a computer mag in the hope punters pay the registration fee to help you out with the whopping phone bill. Or something more illustrious, Project Director for a game script, pushing polygons around the screen. Or even architecture for the ultimate virtual reality driving simulator, instructions for a cloudburst or a horse suddenly darting into the road?

Keep you alert half the night, the ice will.

My Christ! Never mind a phone bill. How about the whopping mortgage? Paid off by the life insurance by now, bound to have been. Paid by my death. How very timely.

Matthew rambling on again tonight in a fundamental assembly language, hmm? I used to assemble language, or tried to. During my final year doing Eng Lit at the University of Birmingham in Edgbaston, I shared a house with four other women and one nerdy bloke (supposedly our rape guard in residence) in a long seedy street not many stones' throws from Winson Green prison. Ex-offenders were being rehabbed at a couple of community hostels elsewhere along our road, and another house sheltered former mental patients. Elderly old folk roosted alone here and there; when they died or were obliged to go into care, a few more Asian or West Indian families would most likely buy the vacated homes.

I never worked out which house the three-legged dog belonged to, but regular as clockwork it would lollop past me on my way to the campus in the morning, out on its own, wearing collar and lead but holding its own lead in its jaws. The beagle's left hind leg was missing, no doubt due to a car running over it followed by amputation, but the animal was nimble enough with one rear propulsion limb and two front legs for balance and steering. I thought and thought about that dog, all the while permutating – per-mutt-ating! – the emotional possibilities. Two years later I was to win a £3500 first prize in a poetry competition with my *Voyage of the Beagle*, and three years after that the poem suggested the title of my first collection from trend-setting Bloodaxe Books, *Three-Legged Hound*. Prestige in the frog-pond of contemporary verse by the tender age of 26!

A poet should strut her stuff, and besides this'll help me keep my distance from Matthew...

Three-legged pooch runs down the street  
Gripping its leash in its mouth.  
Each morning I pass it, and it passes me,  
Never pausing (how could it?) to cock  
Its hind leg against any tree.  
Why does its owner allow it  
Out for a run on its own?  
Perhaps it *is* its own owner, alone  
In the world yet brainy enough  
To pretend it isn't a stray?

Is the leash an aid to balance,  
A sort of steering wheel,  
A way of correcting bias:  
Slack, go west – tug and head south,  
Technology of the mouth?

I'd love to ask it these questions.  
Maybe that beagle can talk  
Or – let's be serious – convey  
A reply by way of a bark?  
If only its lips weren't sealed.

So does it bite on the leash  
Whenever it's running around  
To keep its secret securely safe  
– Suppose we catch it unawares –  
From the likes of me and thee?

Is the dog slightly dotty?  
(Not spotty – it's fawn  
And brown and cream.)  
Maybe its owner died,  
And she always came along here.  
So this is a ritual remembrance,  
A pretence that she's still around.  
At home every day the dog howls  
Exactly at twenty-past-eight  
Till, leashed, he has his way.

What hurts do we ourselves suffer,  
Lost legs of the heart or the soul?  
Invisible bits of us missing –  
But we carry our leashes around,  
Unseen. They stop us from falling over  
– Like a running three-legged hound.

Copyright by Amanda Riley. *Not* by Amanda Ramsbottom, the ghastly surname I was born with, butt of jokes. Actually Ram is a dialect word for wild garlic, while Bottom is a shallow valley. "To rob me of so rich a bottom," says Hotspur in *Henry IV*. Pretty vale of wild garlic. Try telling people that. Most certainly not a poet's name, in my opinion! Matthew's surname was a lot better. Not ideal but far neater and snappier, with a touch of the Irish, land of Seamus Heaney. The ancient Irish used to say, "If words are not poetry, they are useless."

Not that I married Matthew for his name, but because I came to appreciate him. He was studying electronics and was a doyen of the computer club to which our rape guard, Adrian, also belonged. This was the dawn of the home computer boom. The Spectrum ZX81 had just come out. Games, in arcades at least, were still mainly clones of Space Invaders, but up in their bedrooms eager lads were coding for their micros. Since Matthew's own digs were only a couple of streets away he would come round to see Adrian, and I began coinciding with the visitor in our communal kitchen. The other women ignored Matthew – socially awkward or oblivious, no girl friend of course, computer-junkie, wounded (as only a sensitive would-be poet could perceive)... that florid birthmark on his neck caused him a lot of embarrassment and trauma at school, as I was to learn rather later on, though he didn't like to talk about this. Aside from the birthmark he wasn't bad looking – trim and fresh-complexioned, unruly shock of hair, rather wild blue eyes. The birthmark didn't figure immediately, since he kept it covered, Dr Who fashion, the scarf knitted by his auntie. Even before I knew of the birthmark I thought of him as belonging to the

three-legged dog category – someone lame but who was also, as I began to realize, a sprinter, a goer; which I found interesting.

And increasingly interesting. Apparently Matthew had succeeded in finishing a fiendishly difficult computer game involving the breaking of a clever section of cryptography, whereupon he found on screen the message, "If you completed this game give us a call." Which he duly did. The phone call anointed him as a Code Warrior. Only half a dozen players had phoned in so far. The company would be very interested in using him as part of a team. More than this: he was determined to give them a master game of his own devising, on which he was labouring long hours (even though he wasn't yet using any dry ice).

"If it's a winner," Adrian explained to me glassy-eyed one morning, "Matthew's made. He'll be filthy rich. And he's going to do it. I know he is."

Filthy rich from a computer game? This seemed implausible, but Adrian regaled me with the story of some other youth who was set to scoop a million quid in fees and royalties. True story, so it turned out. This was going to be a giant market. Forget coin-in-the-slot arcade games; home gaming was the coming thing. Giant new heights loomed with such as Matthew as the pioneering climbers. Had I heard of a plumber called Mario, in *Donkey Kong*? Had I heard of Richard Garriot's role-playing *Ultima* that ran on the Apple II? In a few more years really good affordable computers would be in every home in the land. Really neat consoles would plug into your TV, and these new CDs wouldn't only have music on them; they would have big computer programmes. Matthew was a genius, a genius.

Poetry and computer games are pretty much at opposite ends of the spectrum – of the Sinclair Spectrum, you might almost say, if you can remember back then. Both as regards the persons involved, and also as regards the money.

What prospects did I have *realistically*? Probably teaching in some shitty school. I felt in my waters that Matthew Riley might well be my great chance. Pass it up, be a fool.

A poet is supposed to be emotional, spontaneous, candid, romantic even, but an artist is selfish and manipulative and driven too. A poet also has a hard drive in her. Believe me, I thought long and hard. I visited a professional Tarot reader, and "What is before me" was the Queen of Pentacles, signifying opulence, security, liberty (although the "What will finally come" card was more ambiguous, but that was a long way off).

To my own self untrue? Immoral, unethical, unpoetical? To which I say: *read a few newspapers*. Lies, sleaze, hypocrisy, corruption: those are the hallmarks of the golden life, at home and almost everywhere else in the world, to which can be added in many instances bare-faced murder, torture, massacres. What did Gerard Manley Hopkins cry out so plaintively and bitterly? "Why do sinners' ways prosper? Why must disappointment all I endeavour end? The sots and thralls of lust do in spare hours more thrive than I." Raised by my Mum with difficulty after my Dad legged

it – not forgetting the troublesome step-Dad episode of abuse – I was not about to repeat her naïve mistakes. *Protect yourself* – with cash, obtained in the least insalubrious fashion, to be able to build some beauty for yourself.

To salt my conversation and so that Matthew could explain things I bought all of one month's computer magazines (try loading up from the racks now if you're a weight-lifter!).

"Matthew, I'm thirsty, do you and Adrian fancy a pint in the pub?" Was I not getting a poetic buzz from computer jargon? Was cross-fertilization not occurring? Is code not creative too?

"What I'm doing is a platform game, you see?"

"But not as in railway stations, no?"

"No no, levels of play stacked above each other. Mine will be different. You'll be able to make decisions about where you want to go. Instead of being told by the program, the player will be in control. *Cyber* means *steering*, you see. Captaining, being in command."

"So games are really about steering."

"Sort of. One day we'll be able to speak to computers, and they'll be able to talk back to us."

"Matthew, would you go with me to the Christmas party at the Guild? I'm supposed to ask someone." He gaped a bit, mumbled about hours of keyboarding, but no female had ever paid attention to him before.

And after the party, as such things turn out, we ended up tipsily in bed – in darkness since he wanted darkness (the birthmark was yet to reveal itself). Successfully enough in bed: he lost his virginity, and thus became imprinted on me, give or take his computer obsessions. When he called round a couple of nights after the event – interim of fantasizing and fretting? – he was a bit hang-dog and nervous. Couldn't believe his luck, though might I be annoyed and snub him? I asked him up to my room to reinforce the imprinting. At least he hadn't poured aftershave all over himself. Probably never even occurred to him. This time can I light some candles? So that he could see me naked, watch me. Reciprocal revelation of the birthmark might have been a minor calamity but it didn't bother me at all.

The other women thought I was crazy, but by then the Christmas vacation arrived. Matthew could stay home in Nottingham for three weeks solid finishing off his code and hopefully mooning a bit about me. He was bound to me, though I could unbind him.

Success, sweet success; for him, for me. Contract swiftly signed; big up-front payment. Million-and-a-half quid the game would net Matthew. *Alien Reign* was his brilliant masterpiece, ranking him as a major Code Warrior. Despite the steep price it sold and sold, and unlike some rivals the code contained no errors which would make the game impossible to complete. No more such fabulously original ideas were to come to him, but that hardly mattered for quite a few years... I nursed him through the implications of his good fortune, like some latter-day lottery adviser taking a thunderstruck winner under their wing, though Matthew's win was well deserved, not sheer luck. I steered him, and he was grateful for this as well as for

our sessions in bed.

"Would you marry me?" he blurted.

"Yes!" We would adventure together.

Dizzy years were to follow once we both left college. Newly-hired accountant advised investment in property, and we needed somewhere to live. A manor house (just a *little* one) would suit me fine, so we bought Malsbury Manor in the charming village of Malsbury, Warwickshire, very convenient for Birmingham where the team was based – this was before the days of networking and high-speed data connections – as well as a flat in Birmingham itself. But don't pay the whole whack outright in cash. Go for a huge endowment mortgage, then you're racking up a small fortune for the future as well as getting tax relief. Start pension funds, et cetera, et cetera. Assemble a portfolio of shares. Plus, of course, snazzy cars, attending functions and yuppie shampoo parties to be recognized, oh and full-time gardener and cleaners and whatnot, and games room, including authentic old cinema organ rising from the floor and converted to play automatically (oh what a party we had), and my flights to exotic places for inspiration, sometimes even accompanied by Matthew, though he had plenty of coding to keep him busy and this remained his obsession, particularly when the next big idea simply did not come, and lesser goals occupied him. He was still pulling in fairish money till recently but outgoings were steep.

"Driving games are a bit sad," he said to me not too long ago.

"Why sad?" He liked driving.

"They're such old stuff now... If only I could come up with..." And he wandered off, preoccupied and fretful.

I liked to work on my poems in the herb garden in fine weather or in the lovely old kitchen into which on warm days a clever swallow would dart to catch flies.

*Three-Legged Hound* was followed by *Seer*, fruit of my journeys in search of self and soul in far-away places.

My prize-winning inclusion this time, in the mode of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, was a long poem prompted by the Sultan's harem in Istanbul. The hundreds of women confined to the luxurious, labyrinthine harem could practise arts and sciences if they wished. Intellectual activity was quite okay if you had an intellect. (Often intellect was devoted to palace intrigue, and you ran a certain risk of ending up at the bottom of the Bosphorus sewn inside a sack.) My harem-virgin studies astronomy deeply. With the permission of the Mistress of the Seraglio, attended by a black eunuch she stargazes from the roof of the harem so forested with domes and towers and chimneys as to resemble a chessboard in mid-game, pieces sculpted by De Chirico. She's quite a genius. This particular Sultan doesn't bother her with any demands unlike certain debauchees such as Ibrahim who would strip all his women bare, order them to play-act being mares, and riot among them as a stallion. Hundreds of concubines, as I said; this Sultan has only set eyes on her once or twice. My heroine predicts that a transit of Venus will track the tiny shadow of our sister world across the full Moon, observable through her little telescope. On the night in question, when her mental life

would be fulfilled, the Sultan finally calls her to his bed for the very first time.

Some reviews of *Seer* sneered at its tourist tone, “Jet-Set gems” et cetera. Sour grapes, said I (though Bloodaxe took note).

One critic, keen to show that he understood astronomy better than me, took exception to the harem poem: the shadow of Venus is planet-size and so faint that not even the most sensitive modern detectors could tell the difference in the amount of sunlight illuminating the full Moon, as he explained at some length. Though chagrined, I felt that there was still a poetical truth; and I had won an award, after all, from judges who appreciated powerful pathos and irony.

*Seer*, see-er, equals visionary. Swap the letters around, and *sere* means dried-up. Work for my third hoped-for collection was a real struggle, mirroring perhaps the frustrations Mathew himself was experiencing even if he was churning out reams, or megabytes, of stuff. I would take out a piece I had finished a fortnight earlier, feeling fairly satisfied at the time, and oh God the flaws in it. Magazines actually declined several of my submissions and Bloodaxe cooled off from me.

I could easily start up my own poetry press, but that would be cheating. Downright amateur. I had standards, I was sincere.

Nice photo of me on the back cover of *Three-Legged Hound*, taken by Matthew with his digicam in the walled herb garden, seeming slightly over-exposed the way Bloodaxe printed it, me with my long blond hair wearing a white cotton dress made in India. Even then I looked a bit ghostlike. When I went abroad with Matthew he was forever taking pictures which could be used for realistic games locations. Download the images into the computer using a twain-driver, then manipulate them any which way. If I flew off on my own I must be sure to take along my own digicam and use it.

I was a passenger in Matthew's life, along for the ride, which had been the plan, but life's more complicated than that. He had enriched me immeasurably. I cherished him. We made love quite often and I had no affairs. (Nor did he; he mightn't have known how to.) Amanda means “to be loved.” Must be loved. And so it was. Not so long ago I said to him, “If anything happens to me, I'll watch over you,” and for a moment he seemed to flinch, as if at a threat, though he quickly hid this with a smile.

Matthew seemed oblivious to himself as potential parent, and I did not wish for the intrusion yet, even though time was passing by, how it was passing for both of us. Maybe if we had a child my creative juices would flow more freely though I might be resigning my poetical hopes by creating flesh instead of word. Nowadays a woman could safely have a first child in her late 30s, early 40s.

True, we rattled a bit in Malsbury Manor, not that Matthew noticed, but there were plenty of friends who envied, in the nicest way, our fortune which seemed fine enough to them even after we sold the Birmingham flat – who needs a city base when there's networking? – and there was family, my Mum and Matthew's parents and his brother Jim whom he twice set up in brilliant-

idea businesses which failed.

He drops his used-up fag. He's going into the Tripe & Tipple, into which inevitably I flow, sucked in there by the vacancy he left behind him.

Pub's at least half full but I can anchor myself, magnetically so to speak, to a cast-iron pine-top table no one's yet using, being still cluttered with dirty plates. Bit of a wait at the bar till he gets a chilled bottle of Pils and retires to a long railed shelf to lounge and eye other drinkers. Maybe he'll spot a contact for brain-ice.

The first time I came back to haunt him he was sitting in my lovely old kitchen, printouts spread across the huge oak table. (Was he missing me? Or was he colonizing my vacated space?) I rushed towards him, in a sense – a disembodied sense. I could see and hear – the lawnmower outside, Bert Tucker was busy – although smells were missing – I ought to have caught a lovely whiff of cut grass – and as for touch... no, there was merely closeness, proximity.

*Matthew, Matthew –*

“Amanda –?” The sheer shock in his voice, him somehow hearing me.

Why could I not feel myself, see any of myself? Why was I invisible? How was I immaterial, intangible? Stunned, I couldn't understand at first. Was I asleep upstairs? Had I somehow discovered how to project myself out of my body? How come the lawn was being mowed when now should be frosty winter? Unless months had flown inexplicably. I must be in a coma somewhere.

*Matthew, what's wrong with me –?*

“Amanda –?” How he recoiled, flapping his hands as if to ward off a buzzing wasp. “You're dead –!”

Then the final moments of the car crash came flooding back.

*Matthew, I'm alive –*

He flailed at the air.

“You're dead!” he shrieked. “You're dead dead dead!” With such shock and horror that the force of his rejection was like a gust assaulting a candleflame, a fierce blow of breath upon a dandelion seedhead stripping away the frail threads to fly in all directions. It was as if in instants I devolved to something pre-human, pre-conscious, unable to discern, as uncomprehending and stupid as a sheep, not even that, a cod, even this dim vitality dwindling, vanishing. The utter blankness of nirvana, nowhere, nothing – which I did not “know,” could not know until my scattered particles, as of an exploded world, finally came together again, condensing under the pull of Matthew's gravity, of his continuing life, carrying with them faint recollections of my disintegration.

The second time – God knows how many days or weeks later – I lingered longer before he realized and thrust me away. Fearing that he was hallucinating – or fearing that he wasn't?

I was the passenger in his car that morning. Rare indeed for us ever to go shopping together, but he craved the novelty. Quite often lately he had been out driving on his own with his digicam. I rarely shopped in Birmingham – unpoetical destination – much pre-

ferring prettier places within easy reach such as Stratford, Warwick, or Leamington Spa. So: supermarket on the northern outskirts of Stratford, then into the town for lunch. Restaurants wouldn't be busy as this time of year; they'd be eager to please.

Hard frost that morning. By the time we set out around 10.30, the sun had already melted any rime exposed to its rays. Tarmac shone damply, still drying.

Fifteen miles from Malsbury to Stratford. We passed cows, we passed sheep. We passed though a couple of villages. I had wanted to make love the night before. He had not wanted to. He went to his computer and only came to bed after I was asleep.

"Why wouldn't you make love?" I asked as we drove along.

"Love," he muttered. "Amanda must be loved."

"Don't you feel well?"

A wide trailer loaded with a precarious tangle of branches towed by a tractor loomed ahead.

"I need to concentrate."

Until we were past – and then for another mile in silence.

"If something's wrong..."

"Why should something be wrong? Apart from generally speaking."

"I'm sure you'll have another brilliant idea."

"And you'll write lots more poems. It's getting too late."

"For my poetry?"

He shook his head. That's when he lit a cigarette and lowered his window a couple of inches to let the smoke out.

At the bottom of a long slope a railway bridge crosses the road at a slant, so the road dog-legs and narrows – space for one vehicle only. You line up to see that beyond is clear, jink to the left, swing right to zoom through the gap, swing left again to be back on course, upward and onward under power cables hang-

ing high from a pylon close by the railway line. Drivers familiar with the road treat the obstacle as a chicane, a slalom.

At the top of the approach Matthew powered the window right down and tossed his fag out almost unsmoked – already thinking of it a source of ignition for a ruptured fuel tank?

The bricks of the bridge arch are painted with a warning frieze of black and yellow chequers like a banner of little Grand Prix flags. Over the apex a red and white triangle warns truck drivers of the maximum height.

In the lee of the bridge: shade. True ice could have lingered; and there's black ice too. He might have felt the wheels start to slip. He might have over-corrected.

The twitch of the wheel. The swerve of the car. The bridge abutment rushing at me. I never heard him exclaim, "Oh shit!" or "Oh Jesus!" Not even start to exclaim. I think he steered into the abutment deliberately. Risking injury to himself, risking some pain, yet not risking the death that faced me.

The airbag, you see.

On his side only. The brief corner-of-the-eye memory of that rushing manifestation, the loud bang, the accompanying whoosh of smoke and powder a moment before I died made no sense. Those were just a part of the

crash. Only now do they make sense,

such hideous sense. Couple of years ago I borrowed his car while mine was being serviced and the garage hadn't their courtesy one available. Little red light lit up on the steering wheel when I switched the ignition on, fading within a couple of seconds, not something you might normally notice except for it being a dark morning. Red lights bother me.



"Oh that's 'cause there's an airbag in the wheel," Matthew told me. Hidden away in the centre of the wheel, driver's side only. Naturally I'd forgotten all about it. But he wouldn't have. He wouldn't.

I think also that the left-front collision might have sent the rear of the car swinging round in one direction or the other, pulling Matthew away from the point of impact. Maybe the back of the car hit the other abutment, halting the car decisively.

Whiplash for Matthew? Him cushioned by the airbag, then released as it suddenly deflated? Death for me, but whiplash for him? Maybe not even that. By the time I came into existence again he was wearing no surgical collar, if indeed he needed to wear one in the first place. Maybe he had climbed out of the wrecked car quite intact. No spray of glass nuggets from his open window, either! Had the cigarette only been a pretext to open the window fully? His knees shaking, his heart thumping – he must have been in shock even if he intended the accident – but basically unaffected.

He drains his Pils and heads out of the Tripe & Tipple, me in his wake. It's a paradox that I haunt him in inverse proportion to coming too close to him. You might even say that he is not the haunted one, but that I am instead. Yes, haunted by Matthew, that's me – only regaining existence because of him! Without him, there's nothing. If only he would let me cling like a leech, what then? He must think of me as an avenging spirit if what I imagine about the car crash is true. Or if not vengeful exactly – what kind of vengeance can I enact? – let's say a reproachful spirit.

Buoyed by Pils, down the Parade he heads past a window of mannequins dolled up in slacks and shirts, past the plate glass of an insurance company where a few living mannequins sit at desks, to the Regency facade of Pizza Express on the corner – and the Royal Pump Room Gardens open up to view, revealing all across the grass bright busy booths and marquees stocked with ethnic clothing, candles and aromatherapy oils, home-made jewellery, patchwork velvet hats and patchwork leather waistcoats, vegeburgers, elderflower wine and microbrews. Usual stalls for Greenpeace et cetera. On the bandstand a funk jazz trio are blasting forth through amp and big speakers. A juggler jerks a diabolo reel high into the air, catches it on string between two sticks, launches it again. Under a great canopy of iridescent helium balloons the vendor, costumed as a clown, must weigh a little less than usual, although scarcely as little as me.

There's such a levity to the festival, a giddiness. I can't help myself.

*I'm here, Matthew –*

"You're dead!"

A nearby kid takes fright. Matthew manages to control himself, being on public view. Maybe this is why I am not buffeted away at once.

"You don't exist. Leave me alone."

*I can't leave you alone –*

"You aren't there. Bad head-trip."

So it's in all in his mind: him hallucinating my voice,

spectre of guilt, haunting himself. Yes, he *is* guilty of my death.

"You aren't there, you aren't."

*But I am –*

He sways. He lurches. A *Big Issue* seller in camo clothing and combat boots eyes him with mingled solidarity and hostility – don't mess up my patch. People think Matthew's drunk or stoned, and this a jolly event for all the family. "No no no No NO NO!" The force of his rejection rips me apart. I'm –

coming into existence again.

Emerging from oblivion.

Matthew is in his big workroom upstairs in Malsbury Manor, littered with playstations, joysticks, piles of mags and games. Tapestry-look-alike curtains closed, lights on, vivid scene on the computer screen.

Hang back, hang back.

Seen from inside a car, through the windscreen a daylit road unwinds. Hedgerows and trees rush by. Brake and accelerator pedals underfoot on the floor but no steering wheel on the desktop, just his right hand on the arrow keys. Aren't driving games a bit sad, Matthew?

But the graphics are *superb*. Not a hint of chunkiness or pointillisme. As realistic as a movie on TV. It's the road from Malsbury to Stratford. Of course it can't be perfect no matter how many times he stopped his car to take digicam pics, but it's pretty damn convincing. How much memory can he be using? Why, his hands are even visible on the steering wheel on screen, something I've never seen before. How much memory, for God's sake?

He slows the car, left-taps a function key. The view swings. *I'm in the passenger seat*. Pixillated from digicam pictures, looking this way, that way, the exact semblance of me! This is real captured motion not just clever animation. Stylized? Not at all.

He scanned me in. I'm code in his computer. I'm so lifelike, light-years beyond that Lara Croft *Tomb Raider* character. Almost as though in another moment I might say something to him.

Function key again: view swings frontward.

Here's the descent towards the railway bridge. Like a beast the car rushes downward. The bridge, the bridge: he'll crash me into it again. When did he lose the distinction between reality and game? When did he choose to lose the distinction? How many times did he practice, adjusting the program, tweaking the impact speed and angle, studying the consequences? How many times did that electronic doll of me survive brokenly?

The ultimate driving simulator, this. Only needs to be reconfigured for VR. Krash-Kill.

Will I plunge back into oblivion as the car hits the brick abutment? Soon, so soon. Or does he intend to undo my death, to chicane through safely, appeasing himself in a sort of exorcism?

*Don't kill me, Matthew –*

His hand jerks, the car swerves on to the verge, bouncing violently.

"Fuck off!" he shouts, tearing me apart...

But I'm back again. Same night? Or another night and almost identical circumstances?

The same game is running. Half-empty bottle of cranberry vodka by his side, he's driving down pell-mell towards the bridge with its red and black chequered arch.

Hold back, hold back! Cling to a filing cabinet, not to him.

He's mumbling to himself, almost as if praying – though who or what would be pray to?

The graphics are so perfect.

"Yo yo yo," he chants, fingers on the arrow keys, digitized hands on the wheel. The bridge, the bridge: and he's through, he's away and clear, and now handbrake-turning, spinning the car around to face the far side of the bridge. Out of nowhere a sleek passenger train whooshes across the bridge, locomotive followed by carriage after carriage, and vanishes off-screen.

"Thank you thank you," he breathes. Unaware of me, he lifts his mobile phone.

"Charley? Matt here. It's all in the bag – almost. Drive your dream car around the city of your choice, VR driving simulator, shit almighty wait till you see the graphic resolution... What's that? I'm not conning you, I'm just excited. 'Course there's a pile of work still to do. Lots of team-work, hmm? Yeah, I'll download tomorrow. Bug, bugs? 'Course there are some." Furtively he glances around but I'm invisible. End of call.

*Matthew, it's me –*

"Oh no it isn't. You're just my memory, Amanda," he declares giddily. "My extra memory, eh. But I mustn't bother about it." He isn't lashing out now.

*You killed me for the insurance money, didn't you –?*

He slaps himself on the head. "Oh come on now, brain, you know that isn't the reason. Why should I care a shit about that? I'm going to be seriously rich again."

*What was the reason, then –?*

"Okay, brain, if I say it aloud maybe you can clam up and stay in your box." He is actually staring at the computer, addressing it as much as himself. "God of Bytes needs some blood in the game so it'll be for real. What's real, what isn't? Life's a game. Sacrifice to the Byte God, get the biggest boost of your life in return. Satisfied, brain?"

*No I'm not satisfied at all –*

"Game it, then do it for real so it's part of the program. Fucking hot-links with cyberspace. Win the prize."

He's looped the loop: the ice has scrambled his head. My death is the reason he's had a breakthrough, and he planned it so. I'm extra memory floating around in the void, somehow attached to his computer. He sacrificed to the bloody computer as if it's his god – the way in olden days a builder would brick up a dead, or even a living, cat in a wall for good luck. He programmed such a perfect semblance of me into the game that my mind was sucked in when the car hit the bridge. I'm an extension of that mannequin in his machine. Can my ghost be rooted in software or hardware – rather than attached to Matthew himself?

*Listen, Matthew, this isn't the voice of conscience or lunacy in your head. This is me! Amanda the author of Three-Legged Hound, not a passenger in your sodding game. I'm your wife and you sodding well killed me. I've come back and I'll keep coming back because I can't help coming back –*

"NO!" Burying his face in his hands. "NO!"

I'm buffeted but I manage to hold together.

*You can drive me away, Matthew, but you can't keep on doing it all the time. You're going to have to let me stay close –*

"Close? How close?"

*I don't know how close –*

"All the time? You're dead. You don't exist."

*But I do –*

"You are Amanda, aren't you? Oh my god... GO AWAY!" This isn't quite powerful enough to banish me.

He keys, and there am I, sitting in the car right next to him, smiling then scowling.

"Amanda, what do you want?"

It is me who replies, not my perfect mannequin, though her lips appear to move.

*What am I supposed to want? Revenge? Or existence? Patches of continuing existence thanks to you –?*

"As a passenger on my back forever? Me gibbering to myself ten times a day?"

*I can keep quiet. I can think up poems. You can keyboard them, print them –*

"Like some nutter channelling with the dead?"

*They'll be good poems. (I hope.) The best yet, filled with grief and longing and rage –*

Even in death I can be a poet! Poetry is the most important thing. Out of the blank blackness will come beauty.

"That's an impossible demand! I'll have no privacy, none."

*You shouldn't have sacrificed me, should you –?*

"You're robbing me." He seems on the verge of tears.

*Robbing you? There was enough money, and will be again –*

"You're robbing me of what I accomplished. Here, here, the graphics, my breakthrough, the lot!"

*I don't see how I'm robbing you –*

"Because you can't live in my head. It's too much to pay. Too much, too much."

Function key, and there I am, looking at the bridge.

His left hand brings up an editing window eclipsing the view of the abutment. In the window scroll lines of what he used to call vitamin-code – C-plus something or other. He's going to edit me out – to banish me not by a brusque outcry but electronically, the way he knows well. Lose all the quality photo-realism of his latest work, he will – it'll be back to compression algorithms for phone companies and ware for computer mags. But he'll do it, he'll erase me.

Unless...

I close the eyes of my mind. I grope. Handle of the car door. Pull that handle, thrust that door open. Step out. Hard road underfoot. Under-shoe, under-sole. Don't look. Slide towards where the verge ought to be, two sliding steps, three, four, more. Obstruction, lumpy. Open the

eyes of my mind, as William Blake might have said!

Tussocks of grass, and my sandals, I'm wearing my Moroccan brown leather sandals, not at all as on that Winter's day, and the white cotton dress of that bygone photo laps my shins. My hands with their rings, emerald, gold, and amber, poke from the long sleeves, fingernails pearly. Blurry pink fog of nose, cotton-clad bumps of my breasts, I'm embodied. Oh the feel of myself. The thick pollen of oil-seed rape cloyes my nostrils. Through a hawthorn hedge: vivid turmeric-yellow crop in full flower, a musky ocean, solitary steel pylon rising high as an oil-rig. I think rape-seed oil is becoming popular for use as a lubricant out in the North Sea. Biodegradable. Breeze wafts warmly over my skin, birds twitter and warble.

Behind me... dare I look? But I must. His car. Himself at the wheel. No passenger alongside. He's a bit chunky, and so is the car – less real than the rest of the scene, the road and hedgerow and sheepfield beyond, the nearest of the woolly muttons eyeing car and me, or maybe only me. Sunlight reflects from the car, pixillated, pointilliste. He can't see me standing here on the verge not ten yards away. I'm outside of what he can know – unless I trot back to the car. Is that even Matthew at the wheel any longer? More like an animated model of himself and the car... which gets under way, revving, heading for the short tunnel under the railway line, swinging through it with panache, then accelerating away, perceptibly losing definition before it vanishes from view.

I'm alone on the roadside. Should be some other traffic soon. Cars, vans, lorries: where are they? What do I do, wave one down? Beg a lift home to Malsbury? And find what there? Maybe my world extends only as far as I can see, and nothing from outside can enter it. Can a field of sheep and a field of yellow rape with looming pylon and a stretch of road and a bridge and hedgerows and birds suffice? To see eternity in a blade of grass, hmm?

Movement! Animal hurrying along the road. Peculiar sideways gait although speedy: it's a dog, an eager beagle. Carrying something in its mouth: *its own leash dangling, clipped to its collar*. The hound lacks its left hind leg, and its coat is fawn and brown and cream. Here it comes, the three-legged dog. The beagle of Edgbaston years ago, dog of my prize poem. Up to me it bounds and halts, eyeing me, moist-eyed, wet-nosed, tail wagging. The very same pooch. Only, now it pays attention to me.

Dog drops the leash at my feet. Its jaws are unimpeded. Doesn't speak, though. Doesn't even woof. Butts me with its muzzle till I pick up the leather loop.

Never had a dog before. We had a tortoiseshell cat till she died. No dog, though.

What's your name, Dog? Dog tugs me vigorously, urging me to accompany him – along the road, towards the bridge.

Couldn't see till now or didn't notice: words, printed on the lower bricks of the abutment. Capitals and lower case, plainly legible close up. Dog is patient now, panting quietly.

*Voyage of the Beagle. Astronomer in the Harem. The*

*Kitchen Swallow.*

Titles of my poems!

All, all, are titles of my poems, published or unpublished, scores and scores of them, each neatly inscribed on a brick.

*Cat in a Tortoise Shell*. We kept the empty shell of one of those giants from the Galapagos Islands in the herb garden. Cost a bit, it did. Monkey, our cat, used to curl up to snooze inside the shell.

*Dervish Dance. Making Marmalade*, my homage to the Günter Grass poem about Jellied Pig's Head. *Abuser*, my brave exorcism of... never mind. *Tarot Lady*. Oh I remember her well in her nook in Rookery Road near the University, a chubby woman with masses of dark red hair dressed up as a gypsy. House full of spiritual items and twittering finches flicking to and fro in multi-storey cages resembling cane pagodas. Reach out my fingertips to that brick, just to touch it...

Sudden sunlight through net curtains: towering bird-cage against wall painted cherry-red, round walnut table with cards from the Waite Tarot deck laid out upon it in a Grand Cross. Cinnamon incense stick smouldering. Herself, Elisabetta so-called (or genuinely so), as I live and breathe, in black lace shawl and bonnet, regarding me through gold-rimmed glasses with quizzical jollity, head cocked on one side. There's a fish-eye lens effect to the room – it's bent around. Look behind: bare brick wall, each brick labelled with a title of a poem. I'm still by the bridge, yet I'm not by the bridge if I turn away, I'm in Elisabetta's sanctum, opening up for me, and I can reach out, I can take a step forward, two steps, three, I can touch the table itself. Dog's here with me too, sniffing a leg of the table.

"Help me –"

"The Queen of Pentacles," says she.

"Yes?"

"The immediate future is Opulence."

She's repeating what she said once long ago.

"Though in the long run this may change."

"I'm from the long run, Elisabetta. I've run the long run. I'm dead."

"Dear me, but the immediate future is Opulence."

"Can you understand what I'm saying, Elisabetta?"

"You have run a long way to visit me."

"I'm dead."

"Dear me, are my birds dead? Did I forget to feed them?"

"I'm dead."

"So was Eurydice, dear. You could make up a poem."

Did I confide my poetical aspirations once she had finished reading the cards? I'm fairly sure I didn't.

"Tell me: what will be the title of my first collection of poems?"

"I see you brought your dog with you," is her reply. Is that a suitable answer, or no real answer at all?

What's the name of that test that Matthew mentioned? Turin Test, was it? A way of telling whether you're having a conversation with something intelligent while it shrouds its identity.

Elisabetta can talk but she can't converse. On the other hand, here is her room like a bubble of my mem-

ory welling out from the brick, memory as clear as the experience itself once was.

Dog tugs me, and I turn to face the bricks. I feel I should press *Tarot Lady* again – and lo, I'm by the bridge, the road is here once more, the hedgerows, fields, cloying reek of rape instead of cinnamon; Rookery Nook has vanished.

Suppose I touch *Astronomer in the Harem*...?

Oh I'm here in a room hung with cloth of gold, the window-surround and the ceiling inlaid with flowered porcelain, a sofa covered with golden cloth opposite a stove, and this has to be centuries ago – for a richly robed black man is scrutinizing me. I daren't stay a moment longer in case I'm trapped, for these can't be memories of my own but are a pocket of reality ballooning from the poem or else some sort of virtual reality jaunt through the Harem which exists in some computer somewhere, although slapping the brick wall lets me leave and be by the bridge again with Dog.

Suppose I press *Abuser*... No no no.

So: I can enter a persuasive enactment of any of my poems, a scene evoked by each. Is this poet's heaven, or hell? Or limbo? Here is my root-place, where I died, at the bridge. Suppose that I set out with Dog along the road, will I reach anywhere else or will the road simply prolong itself or repeat itself? No other traffic uses this road. There is only Dog and myself. Here are my doorways, written on bricks. Here are my windows to an elsewhere of my imagination, given reality by *what*? By Matthew's genius

as a programmer? I suspect not. By God? By a universe which permits afterlife of a peculiar kind? A couple of hundred links to Tarot and Harem and Cat in a Tortoise Shell capsules? Shall I walk off with Dog, and *what* is Dog really, if reality has any part to play? I could become rather lonely here, but for Dog.

Think, think.

Matthew was at his screen. I was simmed on the

screen, a perfect image – while hovering near him was my identity, which survives. After I cried out, he was about to erase my cyber-mannequin. Did I jump out of the car of my own free will or did he first swiftly type some instruction?

I think I was not exactly haunting him, nor was he haunting me, but that when I died my identity became attached to something much greater than Matthew's computer program, greater than his computer forever

modem-linked to other computers in cyberspace. How can that be?

Dog's deep muzzle butts me forcefully. Maybe I should touch another of the poems. Those capsules of myself, my creations which have taken on a life of their own, privately published as it were!

Dog is insistent. Dumb Dog, why can't you speak? What's stopping you? Lack of words? You aren't a human person but something other. As different as a dolphin or, quite simply, a dog. I suppose I'm the mistress of words, not you. Don't cognitive gurus say nowadays that words cause our thoughts, not that our thoughts get put into words? To compose and to comprehend a poem is a human thing, a proof of full consciousness.

Words are power; the ancient Irish knew that. We've rather forgotten this, intoxicated with our machines. Words have become pretty things. I do not think my poems ever completely cut the mustard, though they were the best I could come up with. Words, empower me!

Butt, butt. Eager beast. Return with Dog to

Rookery Nook, cards on walnut table, twittering birdies in their Chinese cage, net curtains across the window.

"Queen of Pentacles," says Elisabetta.

I'm in this bubble. Where is the door of her den? Alas, there isn't one, there's the brick wall instead. However, there's a window...

Take steps, with Dog. Part the curtains. Dog's excited. Rookery Road's outside, sunlit: parked cars of



yesteryear, tiny weedy front gardens, redbrick houses bending as if seen through a lens, becoming more and more distorted, rising upward in either direction into a blur. Two young Asian girls are larking about outside, chattering in Urdu or Biryani, loud enough to be heard through the glass. Sash window, but the latch won't yield. Rap on the glass: no reaction from the girls, none at all. I can't break out of this place into a wider realm. Dog jerks free and lumbers round the room, sniffing everything, trying to understand by smell before returning to me. Me, I'm the key to understanding.

I'm up against a brick wall. Touch *Tarot Lady*, return to the railway bridge, verge and hedgerows, towering steel pylon in the rape-field.

Which is the most *pertinent* of all the poems? The keystone poem, as it were. The one I least wish to confront and recall, thinking it safely banished into clever words, whereas words bring experiences into being – they produce the thinking without which human experiences would be a mystery.

It's *Abuser*. The Step-Dad incident. Only happened once but once was enough. I wrote the poem much later in a bittersweet style. My Mum never found out or realized. She was out for the evening. Works party, carry on till midnight it would. Christmas a-coming, geese getting fat, who'll put a penny in the old man's hat? I had been to the school fifth and sixth-form party. Martin Dingle invented alcopops before their era by smuggling in a bottle of vodka to lace the soft drinks with. I got merry. At home Step-Dad had been partaking, and could tell I had too. Cold outside – have a night cap to unchill. Lights courtesy of Christmas tree and electric log fire. Twinkle twinkle and red glow. Sofa, so-good. Kiss any boys at the party, then? Isn't it downright unjust that lovely girls are supposed to save themselves up? (Oh not nowadays; with a giggle.) Still, with boys it's fumble and bungle the first time, not so good for the girl. Bit of practice is what's needed; bit of experience, stand you in fine stead. Experienced bloke, not a boy who's wet, behind the ears I mean. It's not as if I'm your real Dad, so there's nothing wrong. Two loving friends, together, hmm? Your lovely hair needs stroking. Who'll put her penny in the old man's lap? (Though he wasn't so old at all, fairly dishy in a mature way.) Best lay my overcoat upon the sofa. How does this feel? Our secret. Let me unwrap my special Christmas present.

When he came into my bedroom a few days later I told him I would go to the police. And he withdrew. From the room, though not from my memory, not from me.

Soul, be strong. Something, be strong. Touch *Abuser*.

Sitting room of yesteryear opens up. Tree twinkles, false logs glow. Very cosy; safer than the chilly world outside. He's sitting on the sofa, glass of malt whisky in one hand, Christmas present to himself, bit of a connoisseur he was, video remote in the other hand. TV on – amazing, I quite forgot the blue TV light. Blue movie, that's why. Soft-porn video rental. Bit of a surprise to me, and would have been so to Mum too, and he didn't switch off the picture when I came back, just the sound, sending the words away, such as they were, yet

only a cause for giggles in my mood after the initial surprise – and then excitement to something more. Had he intentionally set the scene or did what transpired occur of its own accord? How could I have forgotten about that video, nude bodies on screen?

I couldn't put a blue movie into a poem and achieve the same devastating poignancy. The movie was erased.

Dog is excited. He sniffs excitement in the room. There's an angel on top of the tree. Does false-Dad see me as I am now or as a flushed schoolgirl?

"Help you to a nightcap, love? Smooth on the tongue. Just slips down. Come and sit with me." Spare glass on the little table.

Of course he can help me, that's his intention, clarifying now, crystallizing, congealing.

The incident is not as I imagined. He initiated it, for sure, but was I not in part a willing accomplice? He certainly didn't rape me, far from it! I was tipsy, my inhibitions gone away, and I was curious, and oh I was jealous too – jealous of my Mum. In my breast was a pang of rivalry. By this rite of passage, to establish myself.

Obviously I wasn't in control of what happened, or of myself exactly, and the great danger to my integrity was that he might have taken further advantage on other occasions had I not threatened him. What occurred is more complicated than *Abuser* suggests.

I was jealous of my Mum so I participated in something which resulted in my Step-Dad leaving because he was scared of serious consequences if an adolescent prone to emotional fluxes denounced him.

He was at fault in the first place, much at fault. So was I, rather less. When he came into my bedroom subsequently, was that only in hope of repeating his guilty pleasure, or was it partly to seek a means of accommodation with me, him realizing that he had placed himself in my hands as surely as he had taken me, earlier, into his own hands? He may have thought he was in control. He was out of his depth. Not many weeks after Christmas he was out of the house too; which pleased me, yes it pleased me a lot, though it was hard on Mum.

Do I blame myself for the episode? Ah there's no blame, there's only understanding, of how complicated it is to be a person. Spend your whole life learning how, and fail as often as not. Let enlightenment come at last.

The angel glows brightly, illuminated from within, candle in the night.

On the TV: no more images of female flesh – but instead a maze of light, alive, reaching out, filling the room with network upon network, networks sprouting from networks far beyond the room to infinity, which I know utterly – the searchlight switches on in me – are not only computer networks and phone networks but the power grid and whatever is connected that can conduct, and the sea of radio waves too – and what is a person's mind but patterns of electrical activity and connectivity which an instrument sensitive enough and vast enough and fast enough may be able to read through electromagnetic radiations and resonances?

I know that when my body died the pattern of my Self was upgathered into this vast instrumentality, a passenger within a dawning artificial intelligence

webbed across the country and even across the whole world as it emerged from its preconscious state, of a cod, of a sheep, into fuller awareness and needing to understand itself, so that I am no mere passenger but a key to that understanding, a crystal seed of consciousness – the Eye, the I, of this AI.

To understand Self, it explored me. It searched me so that I recounted who I am. In so doing it tasted the quality of existence. When Matthew repulsed me, it re-set me. Upgathered into its instrumentality, how did I float free, haunting Matthew? How did I drift down the Parade in Leamington? How did I dog him in the Pump Room Gardens? It could put forth my pattern into the physical world awash with signals of all kinds, ripples upon a pond, standing waves, human nervous systems and brains acting as aerials, maybe even modulating the molecules in the air, fog of ions, attaching magnetically to surfaces, induced electromagnetic fields. I doubt it can pull off this intrusive trick simultaneously in many places, but it can definitely focus itself upon the real world. I suppose I'm not really me, the original dead me, though where's the difference? I can't tell any difference.

Radiance enwraps me and Dog. Room has gone, Step-Dad has gone. Dog no longer lacks a limb. Dog is a four-legged dog. How he capers. I'm the leg he was lacking till now. He. It. The AI. I have completed it, made it whole.

Doesn't speak, so it seems, this representation of it – its concepts may elude me, and the leash is around my wrist now, binding me to it – but I'm still the utterer of words, the voice.

Routes reach out to everywhere.

Including to Matthew at his machine, such a puny device really, a single cell in a vast body distributed all around the globe, physically and electrically and magnetically.

Easy to appear impetuously on screen, my face thrusting aside his sad busy game. A bubble of vision has opened for me, his workroom bent within a big goldfish bowl. He is an aerial unto me.

"Hullo again, Matthew," say his speakers.

He's dumbstruck.

"Virus," he manages to mumble. "*But how?* No, I've gone mad, fucking mad –"

To know all is to forgive all? Matthew, welcome to Artificial Intelligence. In your earlier brighter days you used to muse a bit about AI, didn't you? Here's the ultimate hotline. *Alien Realm* has arrived. I'll be its human face, its go-between. God is here, Earthlings – a higher being has emerged. Or at least god spelled backwards.

"Get off my computer!"

"As to *that*, don't forget how you prayed to the Byte God –" Mental breakthrough by the Code Warrior of yesterday – or mental breakdown? Questioning for a sense of Self, the AI did pick up Matthew's pleas.

"Where did you think all the extra memory came from, Matthew –?"

The AI co-operated with his code – and my death came about, so that it could upgather a person to explore.

The leash tugs insistently. Dog doesn't wish to be revealed, not yet at least. Dog wants to lie doggo. Dog hasn't erased my image from Matthew's screen but it wants me to be discreet. Anyway, is the midst of a car game the most suitable moment to reveal AI to the world?

Best to withdraw myself, though I can always return to tease Matthew a bit. Give him a chance to catch on to the true situation. If I read *that* aright, in planning to kill me Matthew caused my resurrection, my upgathering into undying pattern.

Dog and I are by the bridge. Words cascade upon bricks that were bare before. Communications from the higher self that now includes myself. Titles of poems I never yet wrote, cryptic oracles: that's how they seem. Or like a great program menu. I'll have my work cut out, opening and unravelling all that is written.

Unimpaired now, fully enabled, Dog hoists a hind leg and pees against the abutment. And woofs.

Never had a dog before, nor has a dog had me, but I think we'll get on famously. Just so long as Dog doesn't become a wild wolf or a rampaging dragon, and maybe that's down to me.

In the sky above the reeking rape field a massive, towering cloud arches its back.

**For Alex Preston, and for Mark McGarry**

Ian Watson, whose last stories here were "Secrets" (issue 124) and "What Actually Happened in Docklands" (issue 132), is delighted to tell the world that he has been "appointed Toastmaster of Armageddon (*quel frisson*) – i.e., I'm to be the toastmaster for ArmageddonCon, with which the Israelis will celebrate the true Millennium at the end of 2000, kicking off in Tel Aviv then culminating at Megiddo itself."



# BEFORE THE FLOOD

*Paul J. McAuley*

The two men, one middle-aged and one young, are squashed together behind the pilot of the little Bell helicopter. They wear fat ear-protectors against the roar of the helicopter's engine and blue FBI windbreakers, and are talking over the intercom link. Below, dry, rounded hills dotted with scrubby dark-green junipers speed by. It is summer, late in the afternoon. Deep shadows lie in the saddles between the hills.

"I'm not sure if I want to do this."

"You're already doing it, John. You're doing fine."

"I left and I didn't ever want to come back."

"You're being a great help to us. Don't think we don't appreciate it."

"That's a double negative. How am I supposed to take reassurance couched in a double negative?"

"I mean that you're doing fine."

"I don't feel fine. Are you sure he's dead?"

"We're pretty sure. You just have to look—"

"I've never seen a dead body before. Isn't that odd? I mean, I'm 38. You'd think I would have seen a dead body by now."

"You'll be fine, John," the younger man, the FBI agent, says.

John Kosik looks through the perspex bubble of the helicopter's cabin at the dry, ochre hills of Utah. He does not feel fine. He left this behind for a very good

reason, and now, seven years later, he is back because Michio's followers are either dead or in flatline comas, and the FBI want to know if Michio is amongst them.

The helicopter lands near a white, fat-wheeled all-terrain van waiting on an unpaved track at the top of one of the hills. John asks why they aren't going all the way in the helicopter, but the young FBI agent merely shrugs and says, "Procedure."

As soon as they have climbed out, the helicopter dusts off, turning away into the sky with a hellish roar. John hunches against the downblast of its rotors. The hot dry air stings his sinuses; the smell of sun-baked rock and juniper needles brings back a flood of unwelcome memories. He shouts, "You think he's still alive! You're afraid of him!"

"We're pretty sure he's dead," the agent says, leading him by the arm towards the van. The driver has already started the motor.

They drive fast along the switchback road, a banner of dust trailing behind. John knows this road well, and feels unwelcome memories stir. There is the cluster of notices, pockmarked with old bullet-holes, warning people that this is private property, and there is the long chainlink fence Michio had built around the 3,000-acre compound. The gate is smashed down. The road climbs through a stand of piñon pines to the crest of the ridge, and there is the deep valley spread beyond the white crescent of the dam and the cluster of towers.

"Look at those things," the young agent says. "Just like alien TV."

At first glance, the towers *are* just like the towers of the roosts depicted on one of the panorama channels of alien TV: tall and thin and organic, twisted like half-melted taffy, fretted with windows and ledges. But they are coated in black piezoelectric polymer, and their lower flanks are studded with big screens which all, judging by the synchronous movements which march ant-like across them, seem to be tuned to the same channel of alien TV.

"I don't watch TV any more," John tells the agent. "Not alien TV, anyway."

"I used to, when I was a kid. It gave me weird dreams."

"I mean real alien TV, not the commercial channel. The raw material, not the edited highlights."

John knows that if you know how to watch them properly, the alien images can tangle with the mythopoeic images hardwired in the human cortex. They can give you seriously weird bad dreams. That was what happened to everyone in the early days of the colony, but John got out. He escaped. He had not seen any dead bodies, no, but he knew people had been killed that night, when the madness took them and he woke a kilometre downstream, naked, with someone else's blood under his broken nails and in his mouth.

He escaped, and tried to put the past behind him. There was reconstructive surgery, a nervous breakdown, a slow recovery. The dreams of things stalking him at night, the paralysing visions of people's faces melting into animal masks, the fear of crowds, slowly left him. He married, took a job in a college in New

Hampshire, teaching English. He has a daughter, two years old, an amazing gift of hope and renewal. Seven years, free and clear. And then the FBI came for him, and he realized that he hadn't escaped after all.

The young agent is asking him something, asking if he is okay.

"A touch of travel sickness." Yes, because he is travelling back into the unwelcome past.

The van speeds down the switchback road into the valley, through the shade of piñon pines and tall blue eucalyptuses and out into the hot blast of the late-afternoon sunshine. The tamed river trickles over and around sandstone boulders. FBI vehicles are parked on a wide gravel apron in a bend in the river a little way downstream of the towers. RVs with microwave antennae and satellite dishes on their roofs, ordinary saloon cars, and a boxy armoured car with mesh over its slit windows. Beyond is the white dome of a pressurized tent. People are moving about purposefully. The whole place has a circus air.

John says to the agent, "You were expecting trouble."  
"Of course. But it was all over when we got here."

Still, as he follows the young agent towards the tent's white dome, John can't help noticing that the FBI men and women are wearing bulletproof vests under their windbreakers, and that most are armed with pistols and rifles. The local agent in charge of the investigation, Buck Gilmore, is waiting outside a kind of airlock tunnel that leads into the tent. A tall, powerfully built man in his 50s, dressed in a white shirt with pearl buttons, blue jeans and cowboy boots, thinning blond hair brushed back from his craggy face, blue eyes that seem to search John's thoughts.

"We appreciate this," Gilmore says. "How was the trip? Can I get you anything? Soda? Water?"

"Let's just get it over with," John says.

He is very afraid, but it is not so bad once they go inside. The tent is pressurized and air-conditioned, noisy with fans and pumps. Harsh lights glare atop tall metal poles. There is a smell of ozone and disinfectant overlying something sweetly nauseous. Those in comas are laid out on metal-framed cots, monitor screens over their heads and stands from which hang clusters of IV bags beside them. Their chests rise and fall in time to the tick of respirators which pump air through the tubes taped over their mouths. The dozen or so dead lie beyond on green plastic sheets that John suddenly realizes are open body bags, packets of documentation by their heads.

"Take your time," Gilmore says, but John wants to get this over with and moves quickly between the rows, forcing himself to look carefully at each empty face. First the living, all of whom have been altered to some degree, far more than he ever was. All are very tall and thin; some have had their faces reconstructed to look like the aliens' bony masks; a few seem to be wearing tattered capes – huge flaps of skin extending from shoulder blades to hips and wrists. There are no children, a blessing. And then the dead, whose dry eyes look up at him from half-closed lids. The dead are

all unmodified. Their torsos are marked by deep slash wounds mercifully washed clean of blood.

When John reaches the end of the last row, Gilmore says, "Nothing?"

"I don't think so." He recognizes no one, not Grace or Hunter or Roanne, nor any of the other original colony members. He says, "The plastic surgery is more extensive than it was when I was here."

It was done by a colleague of Michio's, Eden Galich, a paediatric surgeon who learnt how to do the cosmetic surgery Michio wanted from textbooks and experiments on willing volunteers. The scars down John's sides and back itch reflexively.

Gilmore says, "It's more than plastic surgery. They were hiring a team of body designers on a regular basis. There are 47 here. There should be 48. Most have had talons implanted, which wiped out their fingerprints. And dental records are useless in more than half the cases. Well, DNA will tell, but it'll take time."

"You think he's still alive."

Gilmore's sharp gaze transfixes him. "Apart from these people, you are the only one to have spoken with Dr Perl since he set up this community. Would he have killed himself?"

John has already been interrogated on the flight from Boston to Salt Lake City. He gives the same answer now. "I don't know. I don't think so. Please, can we go outside?"

Gilmore lights a cigarette and says, "Let's stroll by the river a little. You think about what you've seen and tell me anything that comes to mind."

Gilmore has someone bring them bulletproof vests. They are light but rigid, cased in blue nylon. Gilmore shows John how to do up the buckles at the sides. They start to walk upriver, towards the towers. Two sharpshooters start to trail after them, rifles slung on their shoulders, but Gilmore dismisses them. Men and dogs are working through the piñon pines on the far side of the river.

John asks, "How did it happen?"

"Someone used a mobile phone, shouting for help. We think it was Alice Paley, one of the recent recruits. When the local police arrived, they came under fire at the perimeter fence. Someone was shooting from a position in the trees. They responded, and when the shooting stopped they went in. And then they called us. Most of Dr Perl's people were laid out in deep, unresponsive comas. The rest were dead, scattered downriver, or along the road. My best guess is that there was a dispute. Perhaps some of the people here wanted to get away, and while they were being hunted down the police arrived. Then there was a Jonestown scenario, except the followers here didn't drink cyanide-laced orange juice, but were injected with a cocktail of drugs. The medical examiner says their higher brain functions are destroyed. The question is, why didn't they simply poison themselves?"

John thinks that Gilmore has it right, except that the dead weren't trying to escape. He says, "You probably know more than me. I'm sure you kept an eye on this place – you know how many people lived here, for

instance.”

Gilmore draws on his cigarette. He says, “Dr Perl’s methods weren’t exactly legitimate, but I understand that some people in government are interested in the results. But our monitoring was pretty low-key. No infiltration, no bugs.”

“We used to do an intensive search for cameras and transmitters every so often,” John says, remembering. “We always found one or two.”

“Well, they got better at finding them. So I really do know very little about it. I’d appreciate it if you’d tell me what you know.”

John wonders uneasily about just what Gilmore does know. For instance, does he know about the madness from which John fled?

Gilmore sits on a boulder by the water’s edge, lights a second cigarette from the butt of his first. The sun is setting behind the towers, and their shadows tangle across the boulders of the half-dry river bed. The screens glow brightly with the light of another world, all showing the same jerky aerial perspectives of vast fields stretching away under an indigo sky.

Gilmore blows a ruffle of smoke, crosses his legs at the ankles. “Tell me about it from the beginning,” he says.

John is too nervous to sit. He says, “The idea was to live like the aliens as much as possible. Michio said that we would be like pioneers, discovering new territory inside our own heads.”

“Was this when the project was set up?”

“No, afterwards. After it was shut down and we came here.”

“Back up a bit,” Gilmore says. “Start at the beginning.”

The alien broadcasts were first picked up 20 years ago, a thousand compressed TV channels transmitted in the so-called water-hole frequency range, between the natural emissions of free hydrogen and hydroxyl radicals. The broadcasts provided vast amounts of detail about the aliens’ home world, with its big moon and vast desert basins, their technology and their agriculture, their domesticated slave species and their cities, their physiology and anatomy, but nothing of their psychology, not even something as simple as the reason why they had started the broadcasts.

In human beings, the impulse to tell stories is very strong: society is woven from shared fictions; personality from long-term memories laid down by the narratives of our dreams. Life without memory is no life at all, and memory without narrative structure is no memory. Every newly discovered Stone Age tribe in the rain forests of Brazil or Borneo has its origin myths, its stories explaining where people and animals and diseases came from, explaining why the world is the way it is. And all myths, even those of the most isolated tribes, share common roots, for mythopoeic symbolism is derived from the hardwiring of the interface between sensory nerves and the cortex. The storytelling impulse is the foundation of human consciousness. Even artificial ways of thinking about the world – mathematics, science – are strongly marked by the narrative arrow.

But the aliens appeared to lack any overt narrative ability; they had no fiction or drama, no music or organized religion; their mathematical system was non-deductive, lacking any conception of proof and derivation, relying instead on powerful heuristic techniques. Michio Perl, a medical researcher with degrees in psychology and social and biological anthropology, was the leader of a research group trying to determine underlying narrative structures in alien TV, using cluster analysis, statistical evaluation of association between images, vector analysis of framing and tracking, and a host of other techniques. Progress was slow. While tangible benefits were flowing from analysis of alien technology, accelerating advances in material science, fusion technology, medicine and many other fields, the aliens themselves remained as opaque as ever, and public interest in them was waning. After eight years, at the end of an interminable series of reviews, the team’s funding was withdrawn.

John tells Gilmore, “You have to understand that Michio was very persuasive – a true charismatic. He moulded us from the first, and he responded to the crisis with what seemed to be magnificent idealism.”

“And so he led you here, into the wilderness.”

Michio persuaded the film producer, Abner Bronson, to gift them a parcel of land. The colony, as Michio renamed his team, liquidated their assets and provided the labour. They stole – liberated was Michio’s term – the computers, screens and other equipment from the institute. They built the first cluster of towers while living in tents through the baking summers and freezing winters, existing on welfare food and the occasional bounty of a deer or a horse. They recruited new members from vagrants, itinerants and runaways, using a technique of sexual enticement, flirty fishing, borrowed from a late-20th-century cult. They dammed the river, which was prone to flooding, and channelled its flow through a sluice to generate electricity. They built hang-gliders and microlights so that they could imitate the flight patterns the flocks of aliens wove above their roosts.

Gilmore smokes two cigarettes while John summarizes the colony’s history. Now he lights another and says, “You never spoke out against your colleagues after you left.”

“I wanted...” John is struck by dizziness, as if he is somehow falling into the past. He sits down hard on warm stone. He says, “I thought I’d put it all behind me.”

Gilmore sees his distress and says, almost kindly, “You’ll be done here soon enough. If he’s alive, I doubt he’s here. There’s an APB out for him. If he’s alive and out there, we’ll pick him up soon enough. We’ll have to search the towers anyhow, of course, and that’s going to be some job. They’re just lousy with crawlspaces, passages, nests of tiny rooms. Each one a real maze.”

“I know,” John says, looking up at the towers. “I helped build the first of them.”

There are many more towers than he remembers. The first were a cluster of half a dozen, no more than three or four storeys high, but these are dwarfed by

newer structures, twenty, thirty of them standing on either side of the river, some more than a hundred metres tall, the lower parts of their black surfaces studded with screens. All the screens are playing the same scene, aliens flying low above vast irrigated fields where hundreds of individuals of one of the slave species flee in disorder...

John says, "He's still there."

Gilmore has masked his blue eyes with mirror-shades; these flash when he turns to look at John. He says, "In the towers? Damn, I knew it was a good idea to bring you here. How do you know?"

"Because I spent years studying the aliens, and Michio has spent even longer trying to think like them. Because —"

A siren whoops; John whirls around, his heart racing. A dozen ambulances are ploughing down the trail towards the FBI's encampment, blue lights twirling. "It's okay," Gilmore says. "We're evacuating the coma victims."

"No," John says. "No, I don't think you should do that."

Gilmore grins. "Another hunch, Dr Kosik? You still haven't explained —"

"The dam. Did you search the dam?"

"Sure we did. Found two of the dead there. You think—"

And the sharp thunder of an explosion echoes down the valley. Birds loft from the trees as a geyser of water and concrete dust shoots up. John begins to run towards the nearest of the towers. Gilmore runs after him, shouting questions lost in the sudden roar as the river's flow suddenly surges, white water swirling and smashing around boulders. Then with a dull rumble the dam, weakened by the explosion, gives way. A wall of water and debris pours down the valley, smashing into trees, swirling around the towers. One of the towers nearest the dam crumbles under the impact, dropping straight down into the tawny water.

The flood is swirling their waists when John and Gilmore reach the nearest tower, and it rises rapidly, chasing them up the narrow steps of the helical staircase. John stumbles and is almost dragged down, but Gilmore hauls him up. The worst of the flood is already subsiding. They walk around and around the stairs, lit by beams of sunlight that strike through narrow window slits, and climb out onto the platform that crowns the top of the tower.

They are 50 metres above ground, their clothes soaked through and steaming in the heat. John is shaking with reaction. He has banged up his left knee, and sits with his feet dangling over the edge of the big round platform while Gilmore paces the perimeter of the tower, talking into his phone. Below, muddy water filled with the debris of broken trees chases around the feet of the towers. The screens flicker eerily underwater, still showing the loop of the alien hunt. Downriver, the big tent has vanished, washed away by the tidal wave. Ambulances and RVs are smashed up against trees and boulders. People are shouting to each other, their voices small and distant. A dog barks and barks

and barks. Upriver, a diminishing spout of water pours through the gash in the dam's white crescent.

Gilmore folds away his phone and says flatly, "You know."

"I'm not sure..."

"You'd better tell me, mister. I'm not sure how many of my people have been hurt, and I know for a fact my 500-dollar boots are fucked."

"I know what we used to do. We imitated as many of the aliens' overt behavioral patterns as we could — the flocking dances, the so-called aerial-combat rituals, the hunting of certain slave species. Michio insisted that these would encode the aliens' mythic impulses, just as Mircea Eliade theorized that true human myths were codifications of shamanistic rituals, rituals which narrate the creative activity of supernatural beings and constitute the paradigm of all significant human acts. Michio wanted us to think like aliens, and for a while it seemed to work. But I think he was wrong."

Madness overtook the colony when enactment became reality, but John cannot bring himself to tell Gilmore about that. It would implicate him in murder. Gilmore is staring hard at him, and he looks away. He says, "I think all this happened for a reason. I don't think the people who were killed were running away. They were hunted down."

John has a sudden memory of riding a hang-glider in the strong thermals above the cliffs downriver, swooping towards prey clumsily splashing through water, so strong that the muscles in his arms spasm and dizziness almost makes him topple over the edge of the platform. He scrambles back, shaking, his gorge rising in his throat. His hands have become fists; his nails are dug into his palms.

Gilmore says, "It happened before, didn't it? They hunted you. Or wait, fuck. You had surgery after you left. You were one of the hunters."

"All of the dead were slaves," John says. "That's why they weren't modified. That's why the TV pictures—"

He stands up and points, because a hang-glider has dropped away from the crag above the broken dam.

Gilmore turns and says, "Son-of-a-bitch," and snaps open his shoulder holster and pulls out a little automatic pistol as the hang-glider breaks off its gyre and stoops towards the tower. He braces himself and manages to get off two shots as the hang-glider rushes straight at him. John throws himself down as the hang-glider's shadow booms overhead and the pilot swings in his harness and rakes Gilmore from neck to belly with his clawed feet. Gilmore spins around and topples backwards off the platform, a surprised expression on his face.

John lunges after him but he is already gone and the hang-glider is circling back. John waits, every thought cleanly erased by shock, as the hang-glider drops down towards the platform at a steep, stalling angle, the pilot running forward two or three paces and shucking his harness, the hang-glider's white diamond tipping up behind him.

"The prodigal returns," the pilot says.

It is Michio, of course, but so transfigured that John

knows him only by his voice. Hairless and starveling thin, ribcage expanded with a lattice of bones sharply defined against the leathery skin, folds of skin linking arms to hips, arms and legs extended to inhuman proportions, fingers and toes armed with thick, curving talons. Only the eyes, embedded in the bone-white mask of the face, are human.

"Why did you do it?" John's hands are raised defensively, and with an effort he lowers them.

Michio's eyes show amusement. It is difficult not to think of him wearing a mask: the mask that is his face. He towers over John. He says, "I could not let them be taken away. The rebirthing was not complete."

"And the flood has completed it? You'll have drowned them all."

"Better that than allow them to be taken away before the transformation is complete. But I doubt they've drowned. They're in sleep so deep they can survive without breathing for a while. Water is life, John. That was one of the first things we learned. Why did the FBI bring you here? A Judas goat perhaps?"

"They didn't know if you were amongst the dead."

"Only a few died, John. Those unworthy. The true believers merely sleep, and in their sleep they will ascend to the next stage."

"They're brain-dead."

"They will rise again. They will carry on my work, now I have brought them this far."

Michio steps past John with a curious gait forced upon him by the disproportionate length of his thigh bones. He looks down at the flood. The setting sun casts his shadow a long way down the valley. He turns and says, "I have learned so much since you left, John. We have become so close to them now, and the rebirth will be the final stage."

"Your methods are... flawed. Everything you've done here is tainted because you are human. You change the body, but you can't change the mind, you can't change the structures of the brain which underpin consciousness."

"You're wrong, of course," Michio says lightly. "That's why you were forced out of our garden, but you've obviously been rationalizing it."

"I left."

"You failed and fell. But you have returned, and perhaps you can earn my forgiveness."

"If I'd known you were alive," John says, "I wouldn't have come at all."

He always knew that Michio was mad, but he did not allow himself to understand it until that awful day when the colony divided itself into hunters and hunted, masters and slaves.

He says, as steadily as he can, "The only success we had was to merge a little of the alien with all that makes us human. But the human is stronger – it always will be. You've changed your appearance, but not the neuronal wiring that underpins your self. This flood is a primal human mythic symbol, the submergence of the old and a return to chaos, followed by reemergence and regeneration."

"No." Michio is still amused. John hopes it is a good

sign. "It is a fundamental ritual of the aliens. I played it out on the screen for you, but you do not understand."

"We can't know what it means. We never did learn anything. They could be killing those slaves who by planting the fields have learned some forbidden secret about the crops. Or they could be simply culling excess workers once the work is done. There are a hundred explanations. We can't know which one is right."

"When you've lived as we have lived," Michio says, "you would know which is right. You would be transfigured, as I am transfigured. I faced death, John, and was reborn."

"Like every mythic hero. Don't you see? Your story isn't alien. It's human."

Michio cocks his head and looks off into the empty blue sky. He says, "I've done things you can never imagine. People don't understand the true nature of alien TV. They merely mine it for technology, or treat it as mindless entertainment. But I've looked deeper than anyone else. I've seen what it really means, John. A great and terrible beauty waiting to be born." He turns, the bone-white mask unreadable. "The survivors are regrouping. Time to go, I think."

For a terrible moment, John thinks that Michio means to kill him. But Michio steps past and bends and shrugs into the straps of the hang-glider. "Tell them," he says, and runs straight over the edge of the platform.

John shouts after him, but he is already stooping low and fast over the flood, drawing a ragged fusillade from the surviving FBI agents. Then he catches a thermal from the southern side of the valley and begins to rise, turning and turning, rising above the tallest of the towers and still rising high into the darkening sky, lost in the glare of the setting sun as the helicopter clatters over the ridge to the north. John sees the sharpshooter leaning in his harness at the helicopter's open door, and turns away. He does not want to see Michio's last fall.

When he looks back, the helicopter is the only thing in the sky, the roar of its motor echoing off the towers. John strips off the bulletproof vest and flaps it over his head and as the helicopter turns to him he wonders if Michio might have grasped some kind of hidden truth after all. Perhaps alien TV is slowly and subtly changing the human psyche in ways yet unforeseen. He wonders whether the colonists will awaken from their comas as Michio has promised, and how they will have been transfigured. He wonders what kind of world his daughter will live in. And wonders what kind of story he will tell his rescuers.

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**Paul J. McAuley's** next novel, due out soon, will be the third volume of his highly-praised "Confluence" trilogy (Gollancz). His story in the last issue of *Interzone*, "Alien TV," and the above piece (which is not a sequel, but associated), were both written especially for a limited-edition chapbook to mark his appearance as Guest of Honour at November 1998's "Novacon" in Birmingham.



# RAYMOND CHANDLER

*with better drugs*

**Jon Courtenay Grimwood**  
*interviewed by Paul Brazier*

**J**on Courtenay Grimwood is a much-published forty-something freelance journalist who lives in North London with many computers and a teenage son. His first sf novel, *neoAddix*, appeared in 1997. It was followed by *Lucifer's Dragon* last year; a third book in the sequence, *reMix*, was published by *Earthlight* in April 1999, and a fourth, *redRobe*, has just been completed. They are all set in the same gritty post-cyberpunk future of a world recognizably similar to but different from our own, and feature some of the same characters. However, each

book is a complete story, independent of the others. The stories are remarkably complex layered prose and plot structures, and his parallel future is imagined in extreme detail, so it is rather surprising to realize that he had never published any science fiction before *neoAddix*. Given that many novelists begin by working their way up through the short fiction market, polishing their prose skills and their plotting as they develop their visions of their science-fictional worlds, it is fair to wonder where on Earth he came from.

To begin at the beginning, after a water-skiing accident, Jon Courtenay Grimwood was born prematurely in Valetta, Malta, in 1953, and taken away from his mother to be cared for by nuns for the first five days of his life "in case he died." He was sent to prep school in Wiltshire at seven, then public school in the West Country, flying in at the start of term from wherever his parents were.

"My father was a naval officer who ended up doing something for NATO. My mother is a book-loving, hard living English eccentric, who spends as little time in this country as possible. When I was about 12 she persuaded my father that he wanted to drive from Malaysia to England, across India, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, communist Bulgaria, etc... They got arrested, ate slop out of buckets, had stones thrown at them, took guns through customs. It took them months and they travelled with a pile of phrase books and a medicine kit full of morphine in case they got badly hurt. When they got back they gave me a silver-and-jade box from Kashmir, a 19th-century belt buckle from Afghanistan and a dagger from one of the Arab countries. They've always impressed the hell out of me. But it isn't until very recently that I've felt I've known them – I didn't have that kind of childhood."

What he did have was a typically upper-middle class upbringing that involved a Maltese nanny called Carmen to whom he was devoted, and later a Malay *amah* called Zinah, whom he also loved dearly. Some holidays were spent in Wiltshire with his grandmother, "who drank like a fish and drove everywhere with dogs wrapped round her feet." He went to boarding school at seven and came out at 18. There wasn't much opportunity for family interaction – "my brother was about three when I went off to board and I'd left home and was living in London by the time he came out of school... and my sister went to an all-girls boarding school and mixed with a different set of people. When we wanted to communicate with each other we wrote."

When he left school, Jon was expected to go to Sandhurst and follow a military career; but he had different ideas.

"I originally got a place at Exeter to study architecture, which was a joke since my maths was so bad all my buildings would have fallen down! I ended up hitching to Oslo and spent a year wanting to be Edvard Munch and painting very badly.

"I was living near Oslo and cleaning floors at Fornebu airport when I saw an ad in the paper for one of those Modern Arts degrees – English, History, Philosophy, Art – where

everyone made it up as they went along, at Kingston Poly before it got grand and became a university. I rang them, made an appointment, turned up and the first thing the admissions tutor said was, 'Where have you travelled from?' So I told him and he said, 'Oh God, suppose we'd better give you a place then...'

After Kingston he joined a publisher's production department as an assistant. Suicidal levels of stress meant that his bosses all resigned and 18 months down the line he suddenly found himself head of production. A year later, after he'd got married and developed an ulcer, he resigned in his turn and went to Spain to write a novel.

"I lived in a tiny village up in the mountains, a thousand people and several thousand scrawny cats. Wild dogs guarded the track into the village and it took them weeks to accept I had a right to be there.

"I went to Spain and back by bus (which was the cheapest method of getting there). I had enough saved to give me 1,000 ptas a week (about £7) and I didn't even spend that. In fact two months after I arrived, when the people in the village realized I was going to stick around, they dropped all their prices and life became even cheaper.

"I ate white beans, canned tuna, fresh tomatoes and eggs – and the local chocolate – and drank beer that was cheaper than bottled water. Rain came in the roof, calor gas cost next to nothing, and the old woman next door used to come round with bags of onions because she thought I wasn't eating enough.

"The novel was awful. Unpublishable. Self-indulgent, artsy, stream of consciousness crap that involved a rape in London, prehistoric archaeo-

logical sites and a Landrover journey across the Wiltshire Downs. I binned it. At the same time I was working on a thriller set in Norway during the last war. It was based around a huge and deserted wooden house I'd found with friends three or four years before when exploring an island on a Norwegian lake. I binned that manuscript too and still really regret it."

Journalism happened by accident. While working for a publisher in Dorset he wrote book reviews for the *Southern Evening Echo*. That got him a job doing reviews for a West African magazine. Later on he started writing travel pieces and finally stumbled into national magazines and papers. "All the friends I've got who are journalists stumbled into it, mostly drunkenly."

Long before that, back in the mid/late 1980s he wrote *Mrs T's Bedside Book*, *The Royal Bedside Book* and *The Election Bedside Book*. These were vaguely satirical, utterly disposable humour paperbacks that sold well over 200,000 copies and got reviewed in everything from the *Financial Times* to the *Jerusalem Post*. "But as I wasn't on a royalty their success didn't make much difference!"

Around the same time he also wrote *A Photohistory of the 20th Century*, which let him spend the best part of a year nipping to the Popperfoto Picture Library sorting through thousands of press photographs going back to 1900. "I was given the run of it and it was staggering. Almost every event of 20th century history was there, not just once but from every angle. Since I don't believe life makes sense without an understanding of history it was like putting a child in a cave full of glittering jewels.

"That was when *neoAddix*, *Lucifer's Dragon* and *reMix* were really born: when I first realized that news is not about what happens, but about when the public is told what has happened... There were boxes and boxes of photographs, particularly war photographs that had never been printed because they'd give the public the 'wrong' impression or the wrong spin.

"Every sf book I've written has been about news management in one way or another, as well as about corruption, sex, drugs and violence. What makes the world go round basically. Though you can call it politics, love, parties and patriotism if you want."

The first draft of *neoAddix* was sold, plus a sequel, to Hodder. When Hodder got the revised draft, they gave him a contract for another two novels, making four in total. Around the time the advance copies for *Lucifer's Dragon* came in, his editor, Nick Austen, was made redundant. His agent managed to disengage the next two books, *reMix* and *redRobe*,



Paul Brazier

and these are now with John Jarrold at Earthlight.

JCG's work resembles that of contemporaries Mike Marshall Smith and Peter F. Hamilton in that it is not only well written, but features stunningly coherent plotting. "I've always had stories running in my head, back from when I was really young. Some of the plots ran for months and spread and spread. When I was about 14 I had one, about the Mongol invasion of Europe, that ran for the best part of a year. Battles, sieges, courts, travels across the steppe and mountain, it was a spectacular waste of mental processing power, but it kept me more or less sane at school."

One of the more fascinating but more deeply buried aspects of these novels is that they are set in "an alternate historical timeline that branches off from Napoleon III winning the Franco-Prussian war and assumes that WWI doesn't take place because Prussia never gets strong enough to unite the disparate German kingdoms into an empire. Europe without WWI, actually the world without World War I would be very, very different."

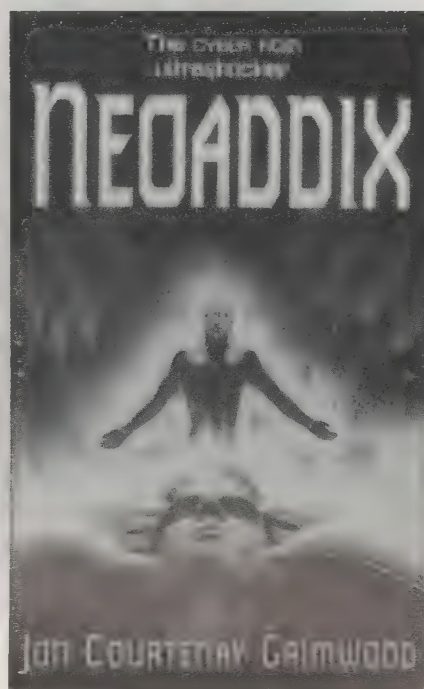
He says, however, that he doesn't keep track of the plots in his books. "I know how the book ends, and sometimes I know how it starts but I genuinely don't know *why* it ends like that – and I don't believe most writers do. What I do right at the start, after spending six weeks or so kicking the idea and the characters around in my head, is a chapter by chapter breakdown, one paragraph a chapter.

"Then I start writing. What's getting written always diverges wildly from the synopsis, usually by about two-thirds of the way through the book. Having finished the first draft, I write the book again only this time I concentrate on *why* people are doing things as well as on *what* they're doing. Mostly it's a simple question of asking yourself, what is this guy thinking, what does he want to happen, how's he going to feel if it doesn't... I then do a final draft that covers the science and checks for consistency.

"Most of the book is in my head, which is why I get really jumpy towards the end of the first draft in case I lose it. Quite how this would happen I don't know, but I always fret about waking up and finding I've forgotten what happens next."

JCG's background includes a wide variety of reading, and perhaps this has influenced his writing –

"I got through the usual classics, *War and Peace*, *Ulysses*, etc at school (it was that kind of school), but the only one of those I'd be upset if I hadn't read is Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*. A black fantasy set in Stalinist



Moscow featuring Satan and a large black cat, with a walk-on part from Jesus Christ as a faith healer, it's the one book I would kill to have written.

"I buy books obsessively and have walls full of them. Calvino, Marquez, Louis de Berniers, Michael Dibden, James Lee Burke. On the sf front, Gibson obviously, Stephenson, Sterling, Jeff Noon who is utterly brilliant, the Hitchhikers 'trilogy', early Gene Wolfe, Mike Marshall Smith, Colin Greenland, Ken MacLeod... The list's just too long.

"Then there is Haruki Murakami, a brilliant Japanese author who writes mostly about burnt-out, 30-something

idealists. And Banana Yoshimoto. Both write that staggeringly simple elegant prose that looks easy until you actually try it.

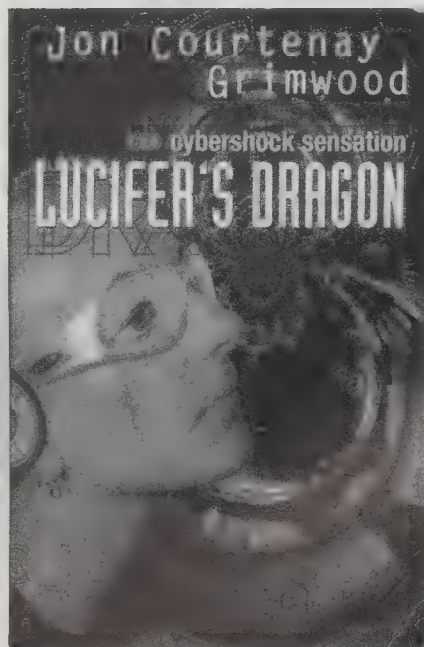
"Banana Yoshimoto has won endless literary prizes and her books are full of impossibilities treated as utterly normal. What I like most about her writing is that ability to treat the impossible as mundane. Over here we tend to signal that something is odd, announce that it's odd and then explain what's odd about it. And while Latin American magic realism (which I also love) often uses whimsy to get round the problem, the Japanese just take the impossible as matter of fact. Partly, I think, it's a result of being based in a belief-system that gives inanimate things souls. And writers like Murakami don't have to believe Shinto – any more than we have to buy into Christianity to be bound by ritual or guilt.

"As I said, I grew up in the Far East and I went to the kind of prep school that figured the best way to rinse a child's hair was line ten naked small boys up in a row and have a middle-aged woman tip buckets of cold water over their heads (very Japanese!).

"I loved manga when it first hit Europe, still do. But what we think of as manga and what the Japanese think of as manga is a bit different. For me, *Akira* is one of the all time great films, up there with *Solaris* – it just happens to be a cartoon. Unfortunately, animé vids like *Overfiend* got into the UK charts and suddenly most of the animé being rushed out was sex-loaded, violent, shallow and aimed at 16-year-olds. Which isn't to say there isn't a place in manga for impossibly pneumatic killer sex-kittens, there's just a lot more to manga and animé than that. In Japan, there's a whole section of manga aimed at teen girls, at pre-pubescent boys, at men travelling to work."

JCG is obviously computer-literate, and this has had a strong influence on his books. "We're a five-computer, six-Gameboy family, and the sitting-room floor is thick with copies of *.Net*, *Games Master*, *N64 Pro*, etc... But then I occasionally write games and software reviews for the *Guardian* and my 14-year old son writes a monthly games column for teen mag *J17*. I love computer games and I think that's where some of the most creative sf is currently going, into creating the worlds and back plots. You only have to walk down the street and listen to really quite young kids talking about games characters to know that no one in books is creating characters who command that kind of obsessive attention.

"I love the Net and would like to surf it a lot more than I do. Writing a



book a year for the last four years hasn't left much time for anything except sleep and as a fully paid-up insomniac I don't do much of that. I loathe most television. Largely because the stuff that doesn't irritate me bores me shitless and there's only so many bad American sitcoms you can watch in one lifetime. Movies are another matter. I could quite happily watch reruns of everything from *Fifth Element* to *Solaris* till the cows come home."

A big problem with any serial fiction is that the more adventures characters have, the more unreal the fiction becomes – no one could just carry on having adventure after adventure like that and remain sane, and this may be the pragmatic reason that many such fictions are limited to trilogies. JCG has come up with a very neat way around this problem: he tells the story of the young life of some characters, and they appear in other books as older characters affecting new young lives. However, this does mean that the society, the weaponry, and the people have to evolve, so this future has to be mapped out in detail and that there may be other tales in parallel with the ones already told.

"I didn't set out to write a trilogy or a series... Having created a world that reflected our own I found myself wanting to revisit it but not revisit the same characters. If you're lucky – or maybe unlucky – you get one truly great adventure in your life and that's it; unless you're a terrorist, a revolutionary, or a spy, in which case living dangerously goes with the job. I didn't

want to do James Bond in the 22nd century, I wanted to do 'ordinary guy gets into distinctly un-ordinary situation – and comes out as someone else.' That said, the character Axl in the book I'm just finishing may well end up working permanently as a hitman/fixer for the Vatican, just swapping bodies.

"Life seems to me to be made up of entrances and exits. *neoAddix* got critical stick for having characters walk in and out, without their stories being wrapped up but what I was doing was try to reflect life, where lovers and friends come and go, and sometimes people are with you and sometimes not. I find the idea of concentrating on only one character slightly odd. The world doesn't work like that."

In the same way that the novels seem to be set in a pre-planned world, the characters too seem to be fully formed. But only little bits of characters' backgrounds make it into the novels and some, Rosary for instance, seem more to have been manufactured than born.

"Rosary is a self-created machine. He's what happens when a human decides to dispense with everything that defines being human and cuts back to an almost reptilian brain.

"In *neoAddix*, I know all about Razz, Lady Clare, Maxine, same for Caro and Angeli from *Lucifer's Dragon*, and for Fixx and LizAlec in *reMix*. I try to drip-feed background for the main characters rather than do it in chunks. Minor characters, I might know what they want, where they were born and what they've been doing for the past few years, but not the full works. Someone like Lars or Jude from *reMix*,

I know what's going on inside their heads, I know who they are but not all of the why. On the whole, in life you don't know these things with people you don't get really close to. Jude's seen too much, she's lived too hard, for her life's a compromise, but one she can live with. I know that for a fact. But I can't tell you the very first thing Jude had to compromise over..."

Many of JCG's protagonists are menarchal young women. This is hardly a usual subject for science fiction, but perhaps it is part of an unconscious targeting of the books.

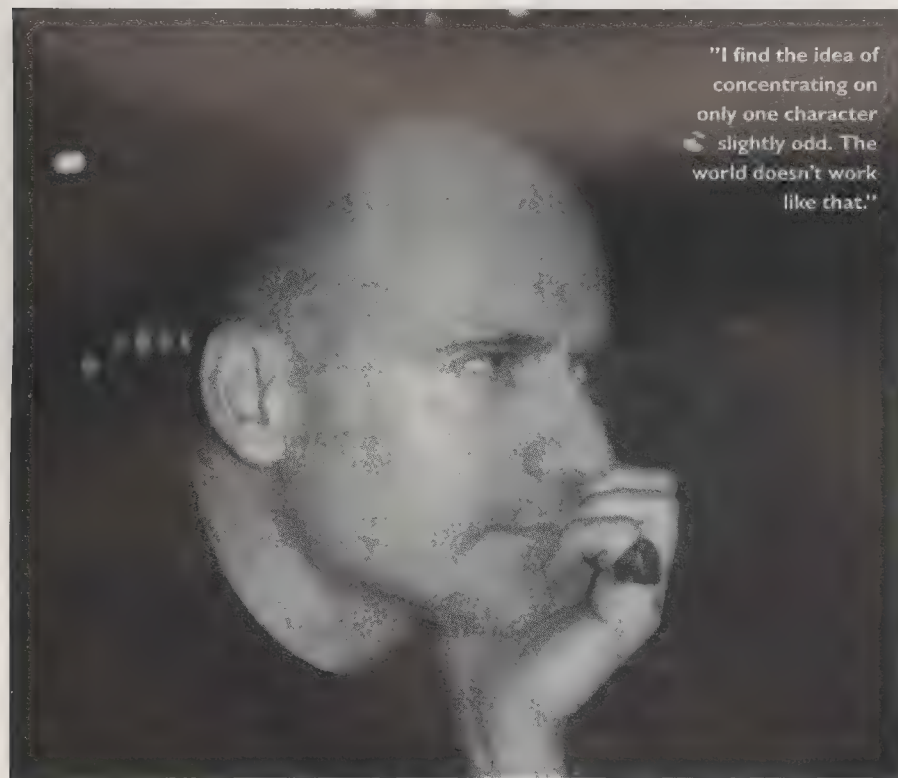
"I wasn't aware of it and it certainly wasn't conscious but thinking about it I'm not remotely surprised. The menarche has strong magical/social connotations (look at *Company of Wolves* or Sendak's *Outside Over There*.) Plus I've always had a real thing for highly intelligent women and most I've met fought like crazy against their surroundings, families or backgrounds to define themselves while still in their teens, whereas most of the guys I know didn't really start breaking or remaking their identities until they reached the twenties, sometimes later.

"I've got no target audience at all. I figure they won't be afraid of technology, drugs, sex or politics. And chances are they'd have been punks in the '70s, goths in the '80s or techno junkies in the '90s. But that's about it, and though I'd think most are male I've had letters from 20-something women, men in their 40s, and teenage boys."

Like everything else, the hardware in the books is very convincingly portrayed using jargon, model numbers and manufacturers' names (including survivals from our own times – it is pleasing to see Apple in there with Volkswagen).

"All the tek is just extrapolated from what's around now and the model numbers are just further forward versions of current ones. I do have a tightly worked timescale for nanotechnology and weaponry, as well as advances in computing, genetics and biotechnology (but events keep overtaking me anyway!). For example, the spider-like pulse cannons in *Lucifer's Dragon* came from information on the website of a weapons manufacturer, just pushed forward from idea to completion. I'm also a *New Scientist* junkie, on mailing lists for various nanotechnology groups and unashamedly throw myself at the mercy of rec.arts.sf.science whenever I get stuck."

The techno-based violence and mayhem in the books is often reported in a jargon-filled, detached mode, sometimes simply listing the mechanical attributes and effects of the devices used. This dispassionate use of jargon creates a powerful rhetorical effect



Paul Brazier

when we return to the people, how they feel and what they are doing, and the language goes back to 'in-clear' mode. While this could be seen as an accidental effect, "it's entirely intentional. Men in particular have this ability – if you can call it that – to separate the mechanical beauty of weapons from the fact they kill people. At about 18 I hammered hell out of a huge oilcan full of sand with a submachine gun on a firing range during a visit to Sandhurst. The sergeant instructing me was talking about fire rate, the simplicity of design, the fact you could drop the bloody thing in a puddle and it wouldn't jam and all the while I was watching bullets punch jagged holes through metal and thinking about what if the oil can was a human. That said, I can't pass a gun without picking it up.

"I describe the weapons in technical terms, the injuries in biological ones and only cut back to the effect of the violence afterwards. Mostly it comes from seeing what's going on in my head while writing it and cutting between scenes and moods like directing a film. But it also comes from having one friend years ago who was shot through the back, another who had a gun put to his head, both in Northern Ireland. In the way that you don't forget if you've ever seen the scar that comes from someone having their throat cut and living, so the exit scar from a bullet is unmistakable. It helps put the allure of weapons into perspective."

Speaking of casualties, there aren't many old people in the books, and most of the main players are either teenage or mid-20s burn-outs. As this is already true in current financial markets and the computer world, it is possible that this is not a vision of the future at all, but rather code for now.

"Partly it's code for now, because now's the only time I really know. But mostly – for me – it's about those points in life when people break and remake themselves, create new identities or give up their old ones. I've always felt that as humans we define ourselves by our limitations. Which means that if boundaries change then so does personality. In fiction terms as well as in life, the teens are when you look both ways, back into childhood and forward into being an adult. While the late 20s are when you look back at what you've made of being an adult and decide if it's enough. I think there's probably a border to be crossed every 15-20 years.

"We don't now live in a world of fixed identities (if we ever did). Jobs aren't for life, nor to be honest are marriages. We're not just floating voters, we're floating everything... Everything from morality to appearance has become

fluid. If you don't like your face you can get it remade, if your sex-life's crap take viagra, if you're unhappy try Seroxat, too fat take Xenical, it'll stop your gut digesting fat...

"Added to which, we're on the edge of biotechnology, of being post-human, though given what we can do with medicine you could say we're already post-human. Stephen Hawking says, 'Banning genetic engineering would be like banning the steam engine.' And the man's obviously right. It's not going to happen, no matter what anyone else says. There was a Pope who tried to ban gunpowder and fighting battles on Sundays and he didn't have much luck either! I think the biggest change in the future won't be technical, it will be biological."

Many people love sf because they love big machines, and you'll never build a bigger machine than a spaceship – unless you build an entire new island in the middle of the Pacific! This idea is at the core of *Lucifer's Dragon*, and is simple, staggering, and beautiful, although the reason for doing it is even more fascinating. But the way it is achieved, and indeed the reaction of the UN, is very much contemporary, not 200 years in the future.

"Again, it's code for now, but it's also a blueprint for the future. Back in the very early 1800s the Congress of Nations was dividing up the spoils of Europe; now we've got the UN being as gutless as ever in the face of Milosovic... In 200 years time who knows, maybe a League that embraces Earth, Luna, ring colonies, bits of terraformed Mars? The only thing that's certain is they'll still be arguing, paying themselves too much, dressing up

self-interest as morality and spending more effort on internal politics than solving the problems."

Themes and motifs abound in JCG's books – cats, for instance, but as strays that someone adopts, rather than straightforward domestic pets. There is nothing cuddly about JCG's cats.

"When I was writing that first book in Spain the village was full of feral cats and some of them used to pad suspiciously into the house through a hole in the back wall when I was writing (but only because I used to share my tins of tuna with them).

"It's amazing what other people pick up from the books; it hadn't occurred to me that there was a cat in each one, but there is and it always turns up at a significant point when events could go both ways.

"It's about randomness. I'm going to get very pretentious here, but in *neoAddix* there's a bar called Schrödinger's Kaff where a lot of the significant stuff takes place and there are similar throw-away clues in *Lucifer's Dragon* and *reMix*. Partly it's just that cats don't give a fuck, they come and go, do what they want, live by their own rules... My characters like to believe they're cats, even when they are stumbling through life with all the knee-jerk subtlety of Pavlov's dogs."

Another strong although not immediately apparent theme is telepathy. Despite Clarke's dictum that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," in some ways JCG's novels do resemble dark magical fantasies, with inept but chosen young people setting out after a McGuffin and the whole thing ending in a stupendous battle of raw magic between two ancient wizards. The underlying reason for this impression is that telepathy happens without explanation. A driving force of the plots and often a vital part of the denouement, it is never commented on as such – no one sees it as unusual or unnatural, but neither does anyone notice it or where it came from.

"In the novels telepathy happens, it's an inherited characteristic (though, there's a sub theme that telepathy can be coded for), but it's never explained because – as humans – we don't explain to each other what we take for granted and in the world of *neoAddix*, *Lucifer's Dragon*, and *reMix* it is taken for granted. I explain technology, because the characters don't always know how the technology works and the reader doesn't always know what the technology does. Telepathy doesn't get explained because it wouldn't occur to my characters to want an exposition on ESP any more than it would occur to us to look down the street and immediately wonder how the rod cells and cones in



our eyes combine to feed movement and colour to the optic nerve."

The theme of oriental philosophy shows up most strongly in *Lucifer's Dragon*, but JCG sees it as being inevitable given his settings. "Without getting too up myself, existentialism and Zen have a certain amount in common and mean streets pulp fiction always has combined the two. Added to which, Japan and Britain are both small, socially-stratified, historically obsessive islands off the coast of large continents. Neither are republics, both are anally-retentive about their previous grandeur. I can't speak for anybody else, but to me the mindset of Japan and a certain Western mindset are quite close. *Live badly, die well. Accept that nothing means anything but do it anyway...*

"I can get on a major soap box about this. Original cyberpunk (CP) was a response to the worst excesses of the '80s, to Thatcherism and Reaganomics, to a political creed that made selfishness into a virtue. CP was based on hardware, what we've got now is post-CP, if not post-post-CP! Genopunk (for want of a better word) is based on wetware, genetics, gene-splicing and biotechnology, not computers or computing. As far as I'm concerned, in my worlds semi-AIs are so commonplace they're like electric motors, we've got them all over the house without even noticing.

"I'm not sure there's any profound lesson to be learned from any bit of hard-boiled sf that can't be learned better in a half-hour walk through the backstreets of a major city, especially a Third World one. There's a cosy little English view that goes these characters aren't moral, or uplifting or even very nice and this skewed post-CP version of our present doesn't sound like a nice place to live... But actually most of the world is already living there and the gap between have and have not is getting bigger not smaller.

"CP was criticized in the early 1990s for its supposedly paranoid view of mega corporations cynically tugging political strings. But take a look at what's happened. Only now we've got so used to politicians jumping into bed with business that a corporately-sponsored Labour Party Conference doesn't even surprise us. If you want to see what CP was really talking about back in the 1980s take a look at Blair, who only got elected because he cosied up to an Australian media baron who took US nationality for business purposes and who owns a British newspaper that wants to keep Europe divided..."

It is plain here that JCG embodies his own dictum, "journalists should be people who don't trust the media." So it is not surprising he has turned to fiction as a vehicle for his ideas.

Although JCG's books are not marketed as science fiction, the use of so many sf tropes mean they *are* sf, and it has to be wondered why he chose it rather than other genres, or even "mainstream," to express his vision.

"Oh hell... I didn't set out to write science fiction... *neoAddix* wasn't even meant to be cyperpunk, post or otherwise. It was going to be a crime novel. I just had an image in my head of a woman in a long coat standing at the top of stone steps leading down to a body next to the Seine. Only the cars in the background turned into blue police hovers and the woman turned into Lady Clare, imperial prosecutor in a still functioning Napoleonic empire.



"I'm not sure there's any profound lesson to be learned from any bit of hard-boiled sf that can't be learned better in a half-hour walk through the backstreets of a major city"

"I've always invented worlds and cultures inside my head and if you do that and get it down on paper then if it's not recognizably 'real life' it has to be sf (or fantasy). A really neat thing about sf is that you can get away with more than you can in mainstream fiction – that thing I've got going with psi is internally consistent, so I can use it without explanation. If I was writing a novel set in North London and I wanted to start having lovers read each others minds I'd have to go into some rap about how it happened, what made it possible... and no one would believe it anyway.

"What I think I write is a kind of mechanized magic realism that nicks bits from *New Scientist* but also pillages myth, psychology and anything else that's going. Sub-cultural *bricolage*. Personally I blame *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. I remember crawling into bed, flicking on the radio and hearing this weird banjo-like theme tune start up... and I was hooked. Before then there'd been a huge gap when I'd read nothing but crime novels for fun and serious stuff because that was what I reviewed. Not too long after *Hitchhiker's* came *Neuromancer*, which was just a crime thriller with a tek background and I thought, yeah I like this... Raymond Chandler with better drugs.

"People do say, 'Oh when are you going to write a proper novel' but as I told someone the other day *reMix* is about as proper as I'm going to get. Plus mainstream fiction is an industry and to get commissioned the current requirements are to be in your early 20s, photogenic and with cheekbones to die for! (which counts me out if I wanted to...) And anyway as far as I'm concerned there's nothing I could do writing mainstream that I'm not already doing with what I write. (Though I am talking to production companies about maybe doing TV.)

"Occasionally I think I'd like to write a historical thriller but then that just validates the cliché that sf and historical are the same thing but at different ends of the time scale."

What is most encouraging about talking to JCG is this commitment to writing science fiction. Where sf often appears to be a closed genre whose inhabitants turn their backs on the world, while the world in turn sneers at its X-files-and-anoraks image, it is refreshing to find such a good writer choosing the genre for his bold, fascinating and intelligent fictions. And, as horror disappears from the shelves and fantasy dies of terminal constipation, with writers of this calibre pushing back its boundaries, the future has to look good for both sf and for Jon Courtenay Grimwood.

# BUG

Jon Courtenay Grimwood

It was hotter than hell in the Gibson, but a lot less crowded.

Colonel Carlos Williams grinned and put a shot through the head of a distant camel. Not a gratuitous shot obviously, the Martini Henry needed sighting in. The man had been expecting 'roos but what he got were camels, sour-smelling herds of the brutes that he could have tracked five miles down wind. He watched the dying camel kick and shudder from far away and then he watched it close up through a satellite downlink that fed to his visor. The camel didn't see him because the Colonel was wearing a very expensive chameleon suit. He was also carrying a silver bullet for his long-barrel Martini Henry, but that was for later.

"Enough already." Yanking out the earphones of a Sony WalkWear and consigning the last six tracks of *Lux Perpetua* to play unlistened, Jimba scooped his thumb nail neatly under the armoured thorax of a passing bug, split it open and sucked out the information. The Hang Seng had crashed, following the Nikkei into oblivion. The screens were dead and the dealers had crawled away along the wires.

Tough shit.

There were no wires of course, only heavily-crypted infrared links, but singing the MoneyLines as Jimba did, he kept to the old traditional terms his great grandfather Jack had used way back...

...when the bugs hit everyone expected the computers to go down. But at Yagga Ya it wasn't the bank's PC that went belly up or even the time-lock on the Chubb, it was a little numerical keypad beside the front door. Old man Edwards arrived as he always did at 8am on Monday morning to punch in the date of his wife's birth – and got left standing there on the top step of the bank.

The door stayed locked. Shaking his head, Mr Edwards rekeyed the number and when that didn't work kicked the reinforced glass door down where the bolt was. Nothing happened at all, which was weird because an alarm should have gone off.

"Well, surprise me." Jimba used his nail to eviscerate another bug, sucking down its sticky data. So Singapore was nervous. Money fleeing the island as fast as it

could. What the fuck did they expect?

Loyalty?

Once Singapore was empty, he'd have a longer wait for Switzerland to tumble. And after the Gnomes there was just DAX, London's FT and then the big one scheduled in for 9pm that night. With the Dow Jones gone... Jimba grinned – how should he know what would happen once the MoneyLines had closed?

Inside the small bank that Mr Edwards managed, the air-conditioning unit hummed sweetly to itself. It was only outside on the sun-blasted street that the morning temperature was beginning to soar. Sighing heavily, Mr Edwards pulled his trilby down over his eyes and set out on the half-mile walk to the police station. He didn't notice the old bare-chested Aborigine sat in the shade of a wall watching him, but then not being noticed was something that Grandfather Jack excelled in. That, and singing new song lines.

Grandfather Jack was late paying his taxes. Mind you, he wouldn't have had to pay taxes at all if he hadn't inherited a bar outside Halls Creek that kept making him richer. Staring after the old white fellow who was trudging down the wide street towards Yagga Ya's cop shop, Grandfather Jack tutted. He already knew Mr Edwards wasn't going to get that door open, because the door had told him it wasn't allowed to open any more. And he still needed to pay his taxes. Grandfather Jack closed his eyes against the sun and started to hum.

Money makes a sound like bees, that was what Jimba had been taught. Well, maybe money did once but it didn't anymore. Now it was cold and clear, like the singing of stars. Waiting for the end of any song made Jimba nervous, and an attack of nerves always made him want to eat too much. Only there was a limit to how many facts one person could swallow.

"So, where did you steal this, eh?" The cop stank of sweat and wore a black peaked cap crammed on his head. He had handcuffs and a gun too, but they were hanging from his belt.

"Why should I steal?" Grandfather Jack smiled sourly. "When everything is free out there." He pointed

to the arid scrub that started at the edge of town. He hated Yagga Ya like he hated Halls Creek, for its crowds and its blaring radios and TVs. And all he really wanted was for the buildings to crumble and the gums and cane grass to grow back.

"So where you get this?"

The old man nodded towards the cash machine set in the wall of the still-locked bank. "It got spat out while I sat here. Maybe the machine didn't like the taste."

"So you took it, eh?"

"Oh yes," Grandfather Jack smiled. "The machine wanted me to."

Sperm futures were down again on a very panicky Dow Jones. Dollars were living up to their homonym and the smart money was on holiday. That was the IMF official line anyway. Jimba knew for a fact that the money wasn't on holiday at all, it was packing, ready to do a runner.

"The machine wanted you to have it?" The cop was doing his best to sound sarcastic but he was finding it hard to ignore the fluttering \$10 bills that the cash machine kept spitting out onto the dusty street.

He didn't like facts that didn't fit but it was hard not to conclude that the old man triggered the machine's largesse, not least because the screen only bothered to light up when Grandfather Jack went near. The rest of the time it looked deader than a TV tuned to no channel.

The sour-smelling cop currently had A\$500 collected up in one hand and a radio in his other, and he'd been worried he was going to have trouble keeping hold of his prisoner while he radioed in for advice, but the old man just sat himself in the shadow of the police car and began humming again.

A few seconds after his police radio went dead and the alsatian in the back of his patrol car climbed out through a side window to sit in the shadow next to the old man, the cop gave up and went to get a beer.

Sauntering past the striated sandstone hills of Bungle Bungle, the camels ignored Jimba and kept searching for an oasis they would never reach. The animals were

feral, descended from the 19th-century pack trains introduced from Egypt, and released to run wild with the introduction of the train and lorry...

Facts. Jimba spat out a bug he'd picked up and started to chew without even noticing and instead hunkered back on his bare heels and stared into the distance. He couldn't see the man come to kill him but that didn't mean death wasn't out there. Bought and paid for by the boy in his sights.

Colonel Carlos Williams settled himself into the still-warm grit, took a deep breath and then blew it out slowly, lowering the Martini Henry so it passed through where Jimba sat silhouetted against an impossibly high night sky. He had no counterweights in the butt, no compensatory vents cut into the top of the barrel; he didn't need them. When the time came he would squeeze off a shot and the rifle would hardly even buck in his hand.

Soon done now... Soon gone.

Stars began to break out in the darkening sky, their music so distant it made the boy shiver. Sticky trails were forming in the twilight radiating out from the crouching boy like tap roots. Most were events that had gone, while a few had that hazy silver sheen of shit unhelped.

He could live with that. Hell, he could die with it too... The Dow Jones was gone now, sunk against the iceberg of money's massive indifference to its old owners. When Grandfather Jack woke up money with his songs or else money woke up Grandfather Jack – opinions differed – this end became inevitable. For him, for the money itself, for the whole new song. How could anyone claim belief in a free market and then refuse to let money go free?

In the interview with **Jon Courtenay Grimwood** that precedes this story, he says, "having created a world that reflected our own, I wanted to revisit it, but not the same characters." The above story is one such visit. Another visit, his novel *reMix*, was published by Earthlight in April.

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**All it takes is a little imagination!**

# The Immersion Volvax

*Tom Arden*

**O**n the day they turned off the Volvax Immersion, I knew that something was wrong from the first. It was Grandfather James. Before breakfast, I slipped down to his study on the red landing. For as long as I could remember I had done this every morning, eager for his kindly face, looking up from the manuscript of his memoirs, and his gentle, lyrical tales of the days of long ago. I flitted to the familiar door and bunched my fist, rapping out the code that Grandfather James had taught me. Expectantly, I reached up to the big brass handle, but today I heard no answer from within. I knocked again; I turned the handle, but the door was shut fast.

Alarmed, I thought of the strangeness of these last days, the raised voices, the telephone bells, the many motor cars that had crunched around the drive. I thought of all the talk of the Volvax Immersion, and Ursula's glee that it would soon be gone. I shall not pretend I understood much of this. I was only a little girl, but I knew that Grandfather James had been upset – very upset. I pressed my ear against the door. That was when I heard, through the thickness of the oak, the sound of sobbing. I stumbled back. I ran down the stairs, my nightgown billowing around me. Perhaps I thought, if I ran fast enough, I could escape all that this day held in store.

Out in the gardens, the sun was warm already. For a moment my spirits lightened. Birdsong and the heady fragrance of summer filled the air as I raced between topiary trees and long, elaborate parterres. On the rise before the ha-ha, I turned and looked back at the house.

Never, I would think later, had Bridgecross looked more magnificent than in the glory of that bright, burgeoning day. I took in the ivy and the old sandy stones, the broad terrace with its statues and urns, the many chimneys and the terracotta tiles and the criss-cross patterns of the window panes. Then my gaze strayed to my grandfather's window, and all my fears came fluttering up again. I thought about Ursula, Ursula and Miles. Suddenly I was not only frightened, I was angry. It was all their fault, it had to be. I decided I hated Ursula. In those days, it was something I decided several times a week.

A voice came, "Miss Em? What are you doing here?"

It was Ansell, the garden boy. Defensively, I flung his question back at him, as if it were common for me to wander outside in my nightgown, and odd that Ansell should be in the garden at all. He looked at me curiously, then grinned. I liked Ansell, especially when he grinned. I grinned, too; after all, I did not want him to guess that I had been on the brink of tears.

"You're a funny little girl, Miss Em."

"I'm not a little girl, I'm nearly eleven."

"Well, you're still funny. Does Nanny know you're out here, getting your fine things all dirty?"

"I'm not dirty, am I?"

"Not yet," laughed Ansell. He leaned close, sticking his freckly face into mine. "Remember Wilhelmina's chicks? They've hatched. Do you want to see?"

I nodded. Often I had told myself that I would marry Ansell one day; I only wished the day could be soon. Gratefully I dashed after him to the kitchen garden. The chicken shed lay at the back, beyond the radish-

patch. In moments, amongst the cluckings and the prickly straw, I was squatting beside Ansell, cradling a yellow chick in my palm.

"She's so warm," I sighed, marvelling, "and so small. Funny, to think she'll be big as Wilhelmina one day."

"No reason why she shouldn't, if things don't change."

Ansell's words were casual, but at once I was alarmed. "Change?"

"Ma says everything has to change after today. Everything will be different, she says."

Wide-eyed, I looked at Ansell. I had been trying, I suppose, to pretend that nothing terrible was happening. Carefully I put down the chick.

"It's this thing," he went on, twisting at a stick of straw. "This machine they're turning off – it's today, isn't it? Ma blames His Lordship, she does. "Says he's too weak."

"Weak?" I flared out. "Grandfather James?"

If it were true, I did not want to believe it. Angrily I blundered out of the chicken shed. "You don't know what you're talking about! Nanny says you're a rude, common boy and I shouldn't talk to you! Now I know why!"

With that, I would have flounced away, but my high dudgeon was short-lived. I tripped and fell into the radish patch, and the tears I had suppressed burst suddenly from my eyes. The next thing I knew, Ansell was beside me. With an awkward tenderness he cradled me in his arms and I was sure that I really did love him, more than anyone except Grandfather James. Snuffling, I told him not to think I hated him. It was Ursula I hated, Ursula and Miles.

"Miss Em, you can't hate your own people."

I said bitterly, "Miles isn't our people."

"He's going to marry Miss Ursula, isn't he? Be your big brother, he will. Then where will you be?"

Pouting, I said I would run away. "I'll run... into the Immersion, I will! No one shall find me there."

In that moment this seemed a brilliant plan, and the hope fluttered in my heart that Ansell might come with me. I did not consider that running into the Immersion would mean leaving Grandfather James; nor that, after today, there would be no Immersion to run into. Gently, Ansell pointed this out to me. "That's what today's all about, isn't it? This Volvax thing?" He grinned again. "I suppose I'll just have to marry you, Miss Em. When you're old enough."

"Ansell, really?" It was a joke he had made before, but how I wished it were more than a joke! Wide-eyed, I looked into his freckly face. Long after that day had passed, I would remember the tenderness in his eyes then, and the kindness he had shown. I wished only that the moment could last longer, but it was then that we heard an indignant cry, echoing over the kitchen garden.

"Nanny!" Ansell scrambled up. "Cripes, Miss Em, just look at you!"

Nanny, indeed, was most upset. Back in the nursery, she scrubbed my face so hard that I howled. I told her I hated her, but she said that was just the talk she expected from such a naughty girl. "I've warned His Lordship he spoils you, but does he listen? Really, Miss

Em, what can you be thinking of, frisking about in your nightgown with that dirty, common boy? As if we didn't have enough trouble with common folk these days!"

I wailed that when I grew up I would marry Ansell, but Nanny only rolled her eyes and attacked my hair with a stiff, wiry brush. Only at the end, as she buttoned my frock, did she look up at me with sudden earnestness. I gazed into her sad, whiskery face, and all at once I was no longer angry, but frightened. "Just remember you're a quality lady, Emmy of mine," said Nanny. "Never forget your proper station, hm? Whatever happens? Now come on, let's get you down to breakfast."

It was only at the insistence of Grandfather James that I took my meals with the rest of the family. Nanny had thought it an absurd idea, protesting that I was still too young; for my own part, I liked the big, dark dining room only because Grandfather James would be there, benevolent and smiling at the head of the table.

This morning he was absent, and I hated it.

"Only a few hours to go," Ursula was saying, as I took my place uneasily by my grandfather's empty chair. With prim, practised motions the maids moved around us, heaping our plates high with sausages, eggs, bacon and devilled kidneys. Breakfast was always a splendid affair at Bridgecross. Grandfather James would delight in the abundance, but Ursula, as usual, took it all for granted. She looked at me with a flash of that sisterly enthusiasm I had come to hate in her. "Come on, Squirt, look excited! Biggest day since you were born, you know!"

"Biggest since VE Day," said sleek, handsome Miles, as if indulging a passion for accuracy. "Biggest, therefore, since *any* of us were born. Except the old man, darling," he added, patting Ursula's hand.

Idly, my glamorous sister swung her string of pearls and looked longingly at the cigarette holder that lay beside her plate. Before the meal was over, she would jab it impatiently between her dark red lips, fumbling for the cigarette case that Miles had given her. She would never have smoked at the table, had Grandfather James been there.

There were four others, as I recall, for breakfast that morning: Cousin Eddie, whippet-thin, with his prominent adam's apple and his little moustaches; Lady Millicent, his plump wife; bachelor Uncle Dick, pink-faced, with his fob-chain and his quilted waistcoat; and Mr Charles Chambers from the BBC, who had motored down from London last night. Grandfather James never permitted me to listen to the wireless, or I would perhaps, have been excited by this celebrity; as it was, I thought him a slimy fellow, and hated him when he began complaining about my grandfather.

"Really, this is most unsatisfactory. Is Lord Bridgecross not to appear at all?" he said, to no one in particular. "He promised I could record him at every moment of the day. Lord Bridgecross awakes... Lord Bridgecross shaves... Lord Bridgecross at breakfast... Lord Bridgecross, as the last hours of the Immersion

tick away. Why, I fear my report is ruined already!"

Miles leaned back in his chair, his handsome face splitting into a smile. "Chambers, why fret yourself so? The old man's been interviewed a thousand times. Day in, day out, he's been on the wireless, moaning about the mistake we're making. What's this day, if not the end of the line for his sort? Leave him to his memoirs and his senile ramblings. How about talking to Ursula here, who's campaigned so hard for the Anti-Immersionists? Hard work indeed, with the old man against her. Why, you might even talk to little Emmy. She's the one I envy. Imagine it – to grow up in an England without the Immersion! Without all the prejudice, all the ignorance that's blighted our lives."

I shifted uncomfortably. How our lives had been blighted, I could not imagine, but I began to dread that they would be, after today. If I had hated Miles before, now I hated him even more.

"What do we care for the old order?" he swept on, gesturing broadly, as I suppose he must have gestured at the Anti-Immersion rallies. "It's going to be a new world, Chambers. Talk about that – not yesterday, but tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow?" blinked Lady Millicent. She looked up and sighed. "Dear me, I've just remembered I'm opening the fete at St Nick's. Now why did you let me agree to that, Eddie? You knew I wanted to motor up to town. Harrods is doing the most marvellous Post-Immersion Sale – Liberty, too... oh, Eddie!"

Her husband only swallowed nervously, dabbing at the egg-yolk that had stuck to his moustache.

Mr Chambers eyed them for a moment, then turned back to Miles. "My dear fellow, the old order may be crumbling, but that doesn't mean it's not important. My task is to record, not to judge. Whatever else he may be, Lord Bridgecross is the last man alive who worked with Volvax – not only knew him, but worked in his lab, all the way through the war. That has to count for something, doesn't it? Or will there be no history in your brave new world?"

Uncle Dick interjected, "He d-did s-save us from the N-Nasties."

Ursula rolled her eyes. It was now that she decided to light her cigarette.

"What's that, Dickie?" said Miles, swivelling. "The old man – saved us from Adolf? I don't think so."

"Not F-Father. I m-mean, Volvax."

"Saved us, only to enslave us again," said Miles.

"Why, old f-fellow, you're not a s-slave."

"No? Dickie, you're not thinking."

"As usual," murmured Ursula.

"What freedom has there been for any of us," Miles cried, "with three quarters of England languishing in the spell of that machine? Oh, people like us think we're so superior, looking down like gods on those who live under the Immersion. We feel such contempt, don't we? Such power? But that very power not only corrupts us, it imprisons us, too. All free, are we? Let's ask Bertha," he added, catching the arm of the maid who was endeavouring, at that moment, to clear away his plate.

Bertha squealed, then flushed scarlet.

"Please Miles, not this trick again," said Ursula, blowing out a long stream of smoke.

"Darling, I'm serious," said Miles, and it seemed, indeed, as if he really were. "Who better than Bertha to represent the people of England? It's the hard work of people like her who made this country what it is... what it was. Now come, Bertha, tell me: do you feel free? Do you imagine you are possessed of liberty?"

"Ooh sir, I don't rightly know," mumbled the maid. "Ooh sir, it's not my place to say."

"Really, I don't see why we should spend so much time worrying about the lower orders," interrupted Lady Millicent. "Heaven knows, I've none of this class prejudice you young people go on about. Let them keep out of our way, is all I say, and they can carry on as they like."

"But d-do you really think they'll k-keep out of our way?" said Uncle Dick. "I m-mean, when they s-switch off the machine?"

This time, it was Ursula who replied. "Dickie, don't be such a wet blanket," she burst out, gripping the hand of her husband-to-be. "Miles and I have been into the Immersion. We've seen what it's done to this country. If there's one thing I can't stand it's the sheer bloody ignorance of people who've been given every advantage, but don't care a jot for those less fortunate. Mr Chambers is right about one thing. History, that's just what we need. What's happened in this country since the war is criminal, and we've got to make sure nobody forgets it. Look at Bertha here. I don't know what's worse, her cringing deference or her shameful ignorance."

The maid snuffled, her eyes growing moist.

"But B-Bertha doesn't l-live under the Im-Immersion," said Uncle Dick.

"No, but hasn't the Immersion shaped her whole life? I think what Grandfather and his sort have done to her and I tell you, Dickie, I'm ashamed. The worst part is, Bertha doesn't even understand how she's been abused. Why, I'm sure she doesn't even know what the Volvax Immersion is!"

The maid squirmed, but it was I who spoke next. "Ursula... what is the Volvax Immersion?"

Laughter rang round the table. Now it was my turn to flush. I pushed back my chair and would have run from the room, hating them all, when suddenly Ursula was on her feet too. She darted for me. She swept me up in the air. I screeched, but Ursula's high, braying voice rode over my protests. "The citizen of tomorrow! Oh Miles, she's as much a fool as Bertha! My poor sister! We simply *must* take her with us this afternoon."

"To the closing ceremony?" said Lady Millicent. "A little child? Surely not!"

"The old man won't like it," said Miles. "As for Nanny..."

"Bother Nanny, and Grandfather too! My little sister's going to be alive long after those old sticks have breathed their last! Miles, we've campaigned long and hard to get rid of the Immersion. How shall Emmy understand the new world before us, if she doesn't get

to witness the end of the old?" She swung me to the floor again, then squatted down before me. "How about it, Squirt?" she said, blowing her smoke away from my face. "Like to motor along with Miles and me this afternoon? You'll get to see the Volvax Generator – a huge magic machine with flashing lights. Best of all, you'll get to see them blow it up!"

For a moment I felt a surge of excitement, and wanted very much to see the machine explode. I decided that perhaps I did not hate my glamorous sister, not really. Then Miles had to spoil it by adding, "How I wish the old man were coming! By gad, I'd like to see his face when it all goes sky-high!"

I shook myself from my sister's grip. "I'm not coming, I'm not! I hate you both! You're horrible to poor Grandfather James!"

"Oh Miles," cried Ursula, "look what you've done now! I told you she was idiotic about Grandfather, didn't I?"

I ran to the door and would have plunged into the hall. Instead, the door swung open, and a familiar, bear-like figure loomed over me. Exclaiming, I clutched at the shabby, tweedy coat.

Mr Chambers started up from the table, but Grandfather James waved him away. He looked squarely at Ursula. "A good idea, my dear, a very good idea. Yes, little Emmy shall see some history this afternoon. But I think it's best if she comes with me, hm – not you and Miles?"

Of all my memories of that strange day, only one stands out as happy. Now, it seems ironic that joy flooded my heart as we were leaving Bridgecross. Sitting beside Grandfather James in his Silver Ghost, I could have burst with love and pride. Imperiously, the gleaming motor car swept down the drive. The others were ahead of us – Ursula and Miles in the sleek MG, Eddie and Millicent in their chauffeured Bentley, Uncle Dick in his little Austin. To me, it seemed they could only prepare the way for the magnificent spectacle of Grandfather James, a king in his carriage, and me, his little princess. Golden sunlight poured around us as we passed down the long avenue of elms and through the great gates, emblazoned with the Bridgecross coat of arms.

Just one thing marred my self-possession. By the gatehouse stood Ansell, doffing his cap as our parade passed by. How I remember his tousled curls, his crooked grin! How I wished he could clamber up beside me! I smiled at him, but he looked down shyly. Then he was behind us, and again my thoughts were all for Grandfather James, with his gloves and his goggles and his long white hair, streaming back in the wind.

Eagerly I asked how long it would be before we reached the magic machine. Grandfather James only smiled and kept his eyes on the winding lane. Passing through Bridgecross village, drawing level with the MG, he shouted that he would take me by the scenic route. Ursula's brow furrowed, but she only flung up an exasperated hand as the Silver Ghost cut away down a side road. I clambered up in my seat, looking

back as Ursula and Miles, then Eddie and Millicent, then Uncle Dick disappeared from view. I did not know then that I was seeing them all for the last time.

In the Silver Ghost, we wound our way through the lush countryside with its patchwork fields, its hedgerows, its stiles, its clover, its dandelions, its bluebells and buttercups. Finger-posts, mossy and cracked, pointed the way to farms and ancient villages. Headily the incense of summer filled the air. Smoky trails rose from cottage chimneys; fleecy white clouds drifted in the sky.

Grandfather James gestured around us. "England, Emmy! Look on it well, my dear, look on it well!"

After some time, we stopped at a pleasant country tavern, thatched and low-beamed, where Grandfather James had a pint of ale, I had a glass of ginger beer, and we ate delicious sandwiches filled with cold beef and pickles. Members of the local hunt were there, too. I looked admiringly on their bright red costumes, and longingly on their horses and hounds. I said it was strange that the hunt should be out today, but Grandfather James said it was very sensible of them, very sensible indeed. A number of fellows recognized him, and boomed out their greetings. Several times there was talk of the Volvax Immersion, but nothing I could follow. Slowly, the unease I had felt before was returning. When we set off again, I said uncertainly, "We're not going to the magic machine, are we?"

Grandfather James reached for my hand. "Dear Emmy, I said you should see some history, didn't I? But not that silly ceremony. That's not history, not the real history of England. Oh, there'll be speeches, there'll be cheering, there'll be flags waving. For some, it shall be a great day. Like that fool from the BBC, always after an event of some sort." Mr Chambers had left after breakfast, but only after securing a solemn assurance that Grandfather James would speak to him at the ceremony. "I've wasted enough of my life gassing to fellows like that, and all for nothing. Let him talk to Ursula and Miles! They're right, Emmy. It's their world now. I just want to show you the old one, before it's gone."

I prompted, "Gone?"

But Grandfather James fell silent for a moment. For some time, the Silver Ghost had been climbing a hill; now we reached the crest of the hill, and below us stretched a sea of mean, narrow houses. I gasped, for I had never seen houses like these before, identical, built from ugly red brick, and jammed together in long lines. Above the town hung a pall of smoke, and neither grass nor trees were anywhere to be seen.

"The Immersion, Emmy! If the machine is magic, then this valley below us is all under its spell. Oh, there's nothing you can see. The Immersion's invisible, like wireless waves, but you know you're in it when you see a place like this."

"Grandfather, I don't like it! I much prefer England."

"My dear, this is England. Just another part of it."

Shocked, I gazed around me as we descended into the drab, dirty town. The stench was appalling. Rubbish choked the gutters and flowed from metal cans

that lay upended in the streets. There were scurrying rats. Weeds sprouted between the cobblestones. Houses opened directly from the streets and through the windows I glimpsed rooms of a meanness I had never imagined before, dun-coloured and dreary as little identical prison cells, all in a row. Throughout the town the surroundings were the same. The shops were lowering caves beneath ill-lettered, faded signs. The public houses were sinister, reeking affairs of hideous tiles, frosted glass, and scuffed sawdust on the pavements outside. Tall chimneys were visible from every street, belching out the smoke that strained the bright sun into a jaundiced glimmer. Everything was gloomy and stinking and ugly, yet what astonished me most of all were not the places we passed, but the people.

If their surroundings were cheerless, the inhabitants of the town seemed remarkably happy. In the cries of costermongers and fishmongers and flower girls, in the gossip of old women, even in the squeals of babies, I heard the note of joy. Grinning errand boys raced between the houses. Little girls skipped ropes on the pavements or jumped energetically, reciting rhymes, between squares scratched in chalk. Dice tumbled. There were playful scuffles. Merry songs rang from open doorways. From upstairs windows hung Union Jacks, and suspended above many a street was bunting of red, white and blue.

I said to Grandfather James, "Are they celebrating? Like Ursula and Miles?"

"Hardly, my dear. Here, they're always happy."

"Like this? Always?"

I would have expressed my amazement, but at that moment two little boys darted out in front of the Silver Ghost. Grandfather James braked, and the boys scurried on, but never once did they even glance at us. It was then that I realized a further extraordinary thing. Intent on our surroundings, I had failed to register the most remarkable aspect of our journey through this town. "Grandfather James, they can't see us, can they?"

"None of them can, Emmy. It's part of the Immersion."

I considered this. "But when they turn it off?"

"They'll see us then, my dear, never you mind."

As we left the town I was shuddering, though I was not sure why. For a time we passed through a landscape of shabby allotments and overgrown fields, filled with old motor cars and galvanized iron. At last, on the other side of the valley, we came to a high, rusted mesh fence, topped with barbed wire. On a sign by the gate I read the words MINISTRY OF DEFENCE and TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED, but the words were faded, the gates were ajar, and no one opposed us as we made our way inside. The Silver Ghost rumbled up a weedy drive. We stopped by a complex of long, wooden huts, arranged around an asphalt square. Behind the huts, a tall metallic mast stretched towards the sky.

"Grandfather James, what is this place?"

"Immersion Research Centre, my dear. I worked here with Volvox, all through the war. Here we built the first transmitter, the one that started it all." With his bear-like gait, Grandfather James shambled towards the

largest of the long huts. A door creaked open. I was frightened, but he beckoned to me. "Leave the others to their pompous ceremonies. The history is here, Emmy, all in here. Come on, I've got a story to tell you."

The hut stank of stale air and decay. Summer sun beat down on the roof, but inside it was cold as a tomb. I gazed at enormous ragged cobwebs, hanging like curtains at the cracked, dirty windows. Remnants of a bird's nest lay on a table. Floorboards creaked alarmingly beneath my grandfather's bulk. I would have whispered to him to be careful, but my voice caught in my throat. He took my hand and led me between benches laden with strange machinery, banks of switches and screens and dials, glassy valves and metallic coils, blackened beneath layers of soil-like dust. Idly, he flipped switches here and there. Some merely gave back a lifeless click; some responded with a wheezing, then a hum. Lights flickered. I drew in my breath. Expectantly I looked up into my grandfather's face, and wondered if there were tears in his eyes. He turned away, and his words echoed back from the hard, drab walls. Many times I had heard of his early life, but always it had been memories of his boyhood, of the jollities and japes of seventy years ago. This was different.

"Excuse a foolish old man, Emmy, if he finds himself overcome. For six long years this base was my home. Day after day of my life I passed in this laboratory, working side by side with Volvox and the boys." He laughed, but mirthlessly. "Oh, they were a funny bunch, the most eccentric lot of fellows you'd ever meet. Binkie Jamison, calculus supremo. Archie Batsford – 'Cans', we used to call him. Poor Jabber Carstairs, writing his love letters to six different girls... Bunny Haines, with his volumes of Descartes and his Woodbines stuck in his ears... Not to mention Volvox, gesticulating and shrieking in that accent of his. How he got worked up, fit to explode, when he found out that Bunny used to call him 'the Nazi'... He was Austrian, Volvox was, but hated Adolf like poison. Got out just in time, and brought his research to us. Damn good thing, too. We'd have lost the war if it hadn't been for Volvox. People forget that. People like Ursula... Miles. Forget it, or don't care. Lost the war... the empire... everything."

My grandfather's voice had dropped to a mutter, and it seemed to me that he was speaking only to himself. I stepped towards him, placing a hand lightly on his arm. He turned back, looking down at me. "Why I was seconded here, Emmy, I was never quite sure. I think they wanted an English gentleman, a fellow like me, to help create the blueprint. Someone who'd travelled. Someone with culture. Someone who knew what life *should* be like... That's what the Immersion was about, you see. What life should be like... When we immersed Europe, there was no more question of war. Imagine it: across a continent, millions convinced that they lived in bliss. Many things didn't matter to them any more. Many others were simply invisible. That's what the Immersion does, Emmy – that's its power. So you see, after the war we had to immerse England, too.

Not all of it, of course. I mean the parts... the parts that might be troublesome."

At last I was beginning to understand. "It's a way to make people think they're happy... when they're not?"

"That's putting it simply, Emmy, but yes. Daytime dreaming, some used to call it. Radiophonic psychosis, that was one of the terms we used to bandy about. Oh, there's been opposition from the first. Agitators like young Miles, creating a great stink. Never thought they'd get a majority on their side. Hmph! Give the people back their freedom, he says. Freedom? For what?"

"But Grandfather James, those people in that town... why do they have to live like that?"

My grandfather smiled, "They're happy, Emmy. You saw they were happy."

"Yes, but..." New and disturbing questions clustered in my mind. The thought of disloyalty to Grandfather James was more than I could bear, but suddenly I began to see why Ursula and Miles had been angry for so long. Whether I agreed with them I could not yet say, only that everything seemed more complicated than before. I would have tried to explain this to Grandfather James, but all at once he was flipping at switches again, turning dials. Bands of heat, like tiny bolts of lightning, fizzed inside the cylinders of ancient valves. The hum of the machinery was rising higher. With a speed I had never seen in him before, Grandfather James darted from one instrument panel to another, then another.

"Grandfather James, what is it?" I cried. "What are you doing?"

There was a shower of sparks. Smoke filled the air.

"Grandfather! Are you all right?"

He staggered back, coughing. Cobwebs and dust covered his sleeves and his face had become an ashen grey. He waved an arm through the smoke. Disconsolate, he slumped across the instrument panel. "Oh, I'm all right, Emmy. Just a fond dream, that's all... but what can one expect? Rust. Rats. Broken connections... A bit like this country, I dare say... Besides, I was never one of the scientific bods. If only old Binkie were here. Or 'Cans'... well, perhaps his old wireless still works, hm?"

Grandfather James reached for another dial. Crackling through the gloomy hut came a solemn, formal music, followed by the rolling thunder of applause. Then came a voice, one we knew well. It was Mr Chambers, announcing reverently that Her Majesty the Queen had ascended the podium, and was about to speak. Resentment flashed through my mind, and I wished that Grandfather James had taken me to the ceremony, instead of bringing me to this dreadful place. In respectful silence we listened as the Queen, in her clipped, precise tones, spoke of the work of generations of campaigners, of their dedication and sacrifice, of the struggles, often vociferous, in the Commons and the Lords. Casting back to the dark days of war, she paid admiring tribute to the work of Sir Ernst Volvax, but said, too, that we must accept that time goes on, and time brings change. At last we heard Mr

Chambers again, telling us that the Queen's hand was poised upon the lever. Silence fell. First came the sound of an immense explosion, then a band striking up the national anthem.

Grandfather James turned off the wireless. "It's over," he said wearily. "Come, my dear, I think we ought to be getting back to Bridgecross, hm?" Bewildered, I took his hand as he led me outside again. In the doorway he turned, looking back one last time on the old laboratory. "The Volvax Immersion was a complex thing, Emmy. Not as simple as some think. I remember once, after we immersed England, I asked Volvax what would happen if we ever turned it off. He just said we'd have a surprise in store. How about that now, a surprise?" Grandfather James shook his head. "Volvax never did tell me what he meant, but I've long had a suspicion. A terrible suspicion."

Clouds were moving across the sun as we drove away in the Silver Ghost. At first, everything was as it had been before. We passed the iron and the motor cars, rusting in the fields and the ruined allotments. We rumbled again through the drab town with its rubbish and rats and shabby little houses. But this time, the people we saw, stunned in the aftermath of the Volvax Immersion, were silent, dazed and frightened. Some had fallen to their knees; some looked round, blinking; some clutched their faces in their dirty hands. A chill wind scurried about us and a Union Jack, torn from a window, flapped for a moment against our windscreen like a dying, struggling bird.

Only as we were climbing out of the valley did the situation become not merely disturbing, but dangerous. First it was only one old man, lowering his hands from his face and pointing after the Silver Ghost with an anguished, inarticulate cry. In moments, footfalls rang behind us. Bottles, even bricks rained down. I screamed. Grandfather James picked up speed. We had almost made it out of the town when two little boys, shrieking like banshees, leapt up on the running-board beside me. For a moment I thought they would drag me from the car. I yelled at them. I hit them. I clawed at their clutching hands, and they fell back into the street. Sobs racked my frame as we left them lying injured.

"The fools!" cried Grandfather James. I thought he meant the boys, but I suppose he meant the government. "Trained therapists in every town, they said, to help people over the shock of the change. I said they'd never have the resources, and they don't. The fools, the fools!"

He went on cursing, ranting to himself, but I was no longer listening. I brushed my eyes and looked about me, eager for what I thought of as the familiar sights of England. We reached the crest of the hill. Only then did the meaning of this day disclose itself to me in its full horror. No longer was the scene below one of patchwork fields, of hedgerows, of rambling flowers and trees. Now there were only acres of concrete, tar and brick. Where before there had been finger-posts and winding lanes were emblazoned metallic signs, sus-

pended above enormous roads with lane after lane of hurrying traffic. We could both only look on, numb with shock, as the new landscape disclosed itself to our astonished eyes. At last, even the Silver Ghost began to change around us, becoming a different and humbler vehicle. It all seemed like a dream, but I feared that it was not. Instead, I knew I had been dreaming all my life, and longed only to dream again.

Years have passed since that day, and now it is only in the dreams of night that I ever return to the old world. We still live on an estate called Bridgecross, but it is a place very different from our magnificent country house. How Grandfather James knew which one of the semi-detached villas was ours I never quite knew, but I suppose some strange instinct guided him, as it guided all of us after the Volvax Immersion was lifted.

I still live with Grandfather James and his wife, the woman I used to call Nanny, but we have no other family now. In the mornings, in a box room off the stairs, my grandfather still works on his memoirs, or says he does. I don't think he really writes much; I'm not sure. I don't go and sit with him any more.

Often I wish Ursula were here. I miss my glamorous sister; I even miss Miles. Sometimes, when I'm lonely, I go out and look for Ansell, hoping to make him my friend again. I've seen him, I'm sure of it, running with the rough boys from the tower block across the ring road... But one thing, at least, has not changed. When

I mention Ansell, Grandmother still calls him dirty and common, and tells me to keep away from him. I'm sure Ursula would have been more understanding... I've decided I love Ursula now, even though she was wrong about the Volvax Immersion. But then, I suppose she was part of the Immersion... And then, I'm not really sure if she was wrong... It's all very complicated, and I still don't pretend to understand. I've lost interest, really... No one understands why life is like this, and why it's changed so much from what it used to be. We just have to get on, day by day... I don't suppose I shall ever marry Ansell. But then, I'm sure there are other things I could do...

**Tom Arden** is the author of the fantasy novels *The Harlequin's Dance* (1997) and *The King and Queen of Swords* (1998), both published by Gollancz, with a third forthcoming. His first story for us was "The Indigenes" (issue 136). He remarks that until he first came to Britain (from his native Australia) he had never heard the word "estate" – as in housing estate – used in a pejorative sense; and it was the distinctively British double meaning of that word which inspired the above story.

"Doesn't just make the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end – it rips them out with no prior warning" – THE TIMES

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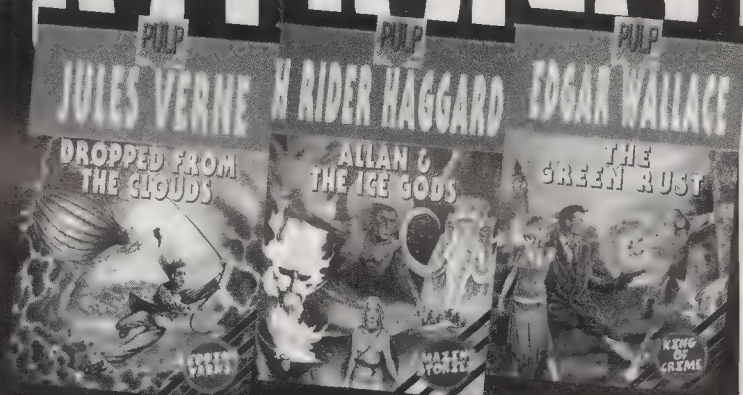
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## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

In case you missed it... spot the living sf author in the BBC News website poll's 10 Greatest Writers of the Millennium: Shakespeare (#1), Austen, Orwell, Dickens, Banks, Tolkien, Joyce, Dostoevsky, Cervantes and Twain.

### THE IMPALER OF DISTORTIONS

**Michael Arthur C. Clarke's** post-1998 "Egogram" has a little gloat about the recent "unique tribute from my adopted country, when a stamp was issued showing my portrait superimposed on the geostationary satellite configuration. I certainly never imagined that this would happen, when I sorted the mail in Bishops Lydeard post office 65 years ago."

**Michael Coney** has been distracted from sf writing by fiercer pleasures, as indicated by a letter in *Railway Modeller*. The author of *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* has Views on motorized tenders: "As a science fiction writer I am accustomed to persuading my readers to suspend their natural inclination to disbelief. Well I can swallow – just about – the fact that the steam locomotives on my GWR 00 layout are actually driven by electricity, but I could not swallow the knowledge that the same locomotives were being pushed along by their tenders. It's ludicrous."

**William Gibson** has an even more thrilling hobby than Coney, and spent several pages of *Wired* magazine explaining his new addiction to the eBay on-line auction market, which meets this former netphobe's insatiable need for... vintage Rolex watches. "[M]echanical watches partake of what my friend John Clute calls the Tamagotchi Gesture. They're pointless in a peculiarly needful way; they're comforting precisely because they require tending." Ahhh.

**Stanislaw Lem's** four-year lawsuit against his former agent Franz Rotensteiner has been thrown out by a Viennese court. Lem was reportedly required to pay the equivalent of \$9,000 in legal costs.

**Anne McCaffrey** won the American Library Association's 1999 Margaret Edwards Award, for lifetime achievement in writing books popular with teenagers: "The ALA has created a beautiful gold seal for placement on all Anne McCaffrey titles." Unreliable sources predict a new Pern book in which a spurned would-be dragonrider finds consolation and telepathic intimacy with the beautiful gold seals not previously noticed in Pernese oceans.

**William Shatner** denies everything: "I'd love to tell you that *Star Trek* was one sexual olympiad, but I was working 15 hours a day. I can't say I didn't try to, but I was always being called to the set at crucial moments." (*Guardian*) Just how crucial...?

**Connie Willis** provided a tasty soundbite on the joy of research: "You get to ask questions like 'If you had the plague and tried to lance one of the buboes, what exactly would come out of it? And how far would it spurt?'" Meanwhile James Patrick Kelly said of her first story "Santa Titicaca": "Connie Willis is willing to spend big money for somebody who is willing to find one of the few remaining copies and destroy it in front of her." This could boost the market for *Worlds of Fantasy*, Winter 70-71...

### INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Nebulas.** 1999 novel shortlist: Catherine Asaro, *The Last Hawk*; Joe Haldeman, *Forever Peace*; Jack McDevitt, *Moonfall*; Harry Turtledove, *How Few Remain*; Martha Wells, *Death of the Necromancer*; Connie Willis, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. Also, Avram Davidson's and Grania Davis's nifty short novel *The Boss in the Wall* made the best-novella list.

**Publishers and Sinners.** Orion/Millennium mercilessly tested our Philip K. Dick awareness by reissuing *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* twice in February – in B format, thus titled, as an SF Masterworks series selection, and a pound cheaper in A format as *Blade Runner*.

**Gender-Bender Splendour.** *Tiptree Award*... Raphael Carter, "Congenital Agensis of Gender Ideation" (in *Starlight 2*). *Lambda Literary Award* (gay/lesbian) sf/fantasy category shortlist: Nicola Griffith/Stephen Pagel (ed), *Bending The Landscape*; Ulysses Dietz, *Desmond*; Elizabeth Brownrigg, *Falling to Earth*; Clive

Barker, *Galilee*; Lawrence Schimel (ed), *Things Invisible to See*.

**R.I.P.** Robert "Buck" Coulson (1928-1999) died unexpectedly on 19 February. He wrote some sf with Gene DeWeese – notably the recursively fannish novels *Now You See It/Him/Them* (1975) and *Charles Fort Never Mentioned Wombats* (1977) – but is far better known in fandom for his copious correspondence and 259 issues of *Yandro* (1953-86; winner of the 1965 fanzine Hugo). His wife Juanita, a more prolific author and the co-editor of *Yandro*, survives him... Canadian sf author *Wayland Drew* died late in 1998, aged 65. John Clute writes: "He was best-known for the Erthring Cycle, a post-apocalypse sf series (1984-6); but his finest work is probably *The Wabeno Feast* (1973), published only in Canada."

**Critical Asides.** "You say that having 'a vision and a message' makes a fine literary style. How about H. G. Wells, for example? *There's* an evangelist and a seer, indisputably. But his writing! Have you ever seen a cold rice-pudding spilt on the pavement of Gower Street? I never have. But it occurs to me as a perfect simile for Wells's writing." (Max Beerbohm, letter to Bernard Shaw, 1903) Meanwhile *Tom Holt's* latest comic fantasy *Only Human* has an interesting Hell scene, where a chap is incarcerated in fire for cruelty to authors (e.g. saying how good their *early* work was, and how the new stuff isn't a patch on it) and suffering his 75 millionth rereading, so far, of some mysterious unnamed text: "I've just got to the bit where the tourist meets the wizard..."

**Confirmation: The Hard Evidence of Aliens Among Us.** This hard-nosed NBC tv survey attained stupefying heights of impartiality with an expert source, interviewer, and executive producer who could have no possible financial interest in "proving" alien abductions. Yes: Whitley Strieber. Lawrence M. Krauss of *Physics of Star Trek* fame was mystified that the alienness of a fragment of iron extracted from someone's hand was considered proved when a geologist "couldn't classify it." God forbid they should risk taking it to a metallurgist. Or a scrap-metal dealer.

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Dept Of (Yet Again) Eyeballs In The Sky*: "Rod's eyes broke away from the ghost and wandered slowly about the great chamber." (Christopher Stasheff, *The Warlock in Spite of Himself*, 1969)... "Jack pulled back his fists in readiness, and eyed the druid through clenched teeth." ("Maze," *Pro-Am; The Serial*, on the web)

# EATING SACRED COWS



**Don Webb**

*interviewed by David Mathew*

In *Small Change*, Patrick Humphries' skinny biography of Tom Waits, the author states at one point that the subject is so eloquent and so damned *slippery* that a journalist is often reduced to helpless quotation; that the idea of getting to the inner man is almost laughable.

Having interviewed Don Webb, I know how Humphries felt.

Not that Webb was difficult in any way. For the record, Don Webb is courteous, funny, and not at all prissy about his work or life. He answers everything in full. What's more, he's probably good with children and animals. But if you've read any of his decidedly curveball fiction, you will probably be able to guess that he's a difficult man to pin down. The "About the Author" page in his collection, *The Explanation & Other Good Advice* (1998), might help to elaborate matters: "He is exactly the character you most enjoy in this book."

Personally, I fell for a spoof review that he published in *SF Eye* in 1996. (I can't have been the only gullible one. Can I?) Webb reviewed an "experimental" book called *Wack-a-Doom-Doom-Wow* by Donald Cobalt ("This novel is as ambitious as it is boring"), in which he revealed that he (Webb) was in his 50s. Therefore, the interview I conducted with Don Webb via e-mail began with a false assumption on my

part. "The Divorce" was an early sale, towards the end of the 1980s, in *Fear*, which suggested (I said) that Webb was in his 40s when he first published fiction. I asked if he'd been writing anything up to that point.

"Well, of course there is no Donald Cobalt," he replied. "I have many fictional ages. For example in the Sercon 6 Program book some years ago, I shared my reminiscences about meeting Mr H. G. Wells in 1904 in Marlin, Texas, when I was a strapping lad of 19. That should make me 113. If my birth certificate is any indicator I am 38, being born on April 30, 1960. (Send gifts.) My birth certificate indicates that I am a white male. Some of my writing and pseudonyms would indicate that I am a bisexual female approximately 500 years old. As my only proof of reality is what I read, I am unsure. As to occupations before and after writing – they include game design, working in a truck dock, making corndogs, selling Christmas trees, fireworks operator, and working the counter in an occult bookstore."

Webb believes that a need to re-establish one's view of the world is important. He goes about saying so in his own inimitable way:

"My father's opera career consisted of playing 'one of the gentlemen of Japan' in *The Mikado*. On the opening night, the 'gentlemen' back onto

the stage. Dad backed off the stage and into the orchestra pit. It's a mystery. But what I was about to say is that the 'short, sharp shock' is actually (a type of) misdirection in my fiction. I know people will be drawn to it, but what I slip in while they are not looking is (I hope) a growing sense that the world is a much stranger place than they realize..."

A few of the commonly agreed facts are these. Webb was born in Amarillo, Texas, in 1960. "Amarillo, Texas," he adds helpfully, "which is where most of the atomic bombs in the west were made." He regards himself as a thoroughbred Texan – on his own terms. "I'm about as Texan as they come," he states, "Irish, Scot, Huguenot, and Chickasaw. My mother's family were tenant farmers, my father's family were physicians in a very small Texas town. I make a fine barbecue and a great chili – and the only reason I don't wear cowboy boots is that they're a tad expensive in my size. 13 EEE. Texans have one great virtue, as well as the many vices of the narrow-minded anywhere: they believe that what you do on your own land is your business. Texas is just as full of nudist colonies and UFO cults as Fundamentalist retreats. Here in the hill country of Texas, we have one of the best

damn barbecues in the world – the Salt Lick – and it's in spitting distance of a Hindu ashram. We eat our cows and hold them sacred too."

His earliest memory is of "being attacked by a razor-wielding 12-year-old girl. I was three. I still have a 12-inch long scar on my right arm. Other than this I had a happy childhood." He is diabetic, dyslexic, and he's published over 250 times, most often short stories; but has also written novels, poetry, game-fiction, a rock song to be broadcast on French radio; he's contributed to truckers' magazines and commercial cookbooks, and has participated in a documentary about plutonium.

At the time of writing, his most recent published books are a poetry volume called *Anubis on Guard* and a mystery novel called *The Double*. (Given Webb's prolificacy, by the time this piece is published he will have more work out. "I try to do about 5,000 words a day," he states. "Most of it goes into contract or technical writing, but I do work on my fiction from noon to four every day. I'm an average house husband. If I'm very inspired I can crank out 10,000 words in a day.") *The Double* is about a man, John Reynman, who discovers a corpse that looks like himself. He must follow strange and dangerous paths to discover the truth about the past, himself and the world about him. "Hardboiled and surreal," the advertising copy reads. K.W. Jeter has remarked, in praise, that the "thought of someone as mysterious as Don Webb actually writing mysteries is a bone-chilling prospect, like hearing that Satan has cornered the advertising accounts for all the Fortune 500 companies; he'd just be so good at it." Webb says that the central character "had always wanted a twin, but not quite like this. In calling the police, he becomes the main suspect in this rather bizarre murder."

The work in progress is called *Essential Salts*, in which "Matthew Reynman, John's brother, has his wife's ashes stolen from the mantle, about the same time that his wife's murderer is accidentally freed from prison. The murderer had sworn to kill Matthew as well. As Matthew runs from the murder, he has to answer the question of who stole his wife's ashes and why... I'm writing a third novel right now, *Pegleg Reynman and the Astrolabe of Dreams*, a prequel to the other two, dealing with the boys' uncle and bad Hollywood movies, Borges and the Vietnam war. I've a couple more Reynman novels planned after that."

How did he become a writer in the first place?

"In college a friend urged me to

take a class called 'Writing the Science Fiction Short Story.' You got an A if you wrote a story, I wrote one in a weekend, turned it in, got an A. My professors urged me to sell it. I sent it off. Got an acceptance immediately; gee, *this is easy*, I thought. I got the press kit for the new magazine. The first issue was going to have Isaac Asimov and Ursula Le Guin in it! Months went by; no magazine. So I called the phone number on the stationery. It was a mental institution. The guy thought he was publishing a big magazine. In the months between I had written dozens of stories, so I kept at it. My first sale was to *Interzone* 13 (Autumn 1985). *Interzone* was publishing odder material than American sf magazines. If what you write is different, you have to look for markets, or change how you write. I choose the former, and with the help of magazines like *Interzone*, which has published me ten times, I've gained a small niche in the sf world. It's hard to cut a new riverbed across rocks, but at least I can point at my scratchings and say they're mine."

On the subject of sales to *Interzone*, could he talk about "The Surgeons" [IZ 98]? For those who haven't read it, it's a cold, cruel and brilliant short story that takes as its starting point the 20th-century fascination with beauty and explores a Snow White/Wicked Witch relationship.

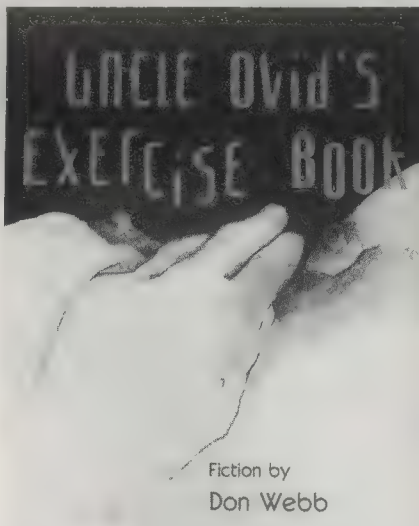
"The Surgeons' was born of thinking about folklore motifs – changelings, magic dwarves, evil queens and so forth. At first these were ways of encoding reality, then they moved closer to us and became fairy tales (due to the work of the Grimm brothers; interestingly their own name is a nickname for Odhinn: 'Grimm' = 'the

Masked One'), then they moved closer still with Disney and so forth; you can actually own one of the little men, and now these motifs are cutting up our bodies, and fucking us, and giving us emotional support. The terrifying thing is we still don't know what they mean. Some years ago I was reading about male circumcision in Afro-Asiatic magical societies. I thought that must be a pretty scary thing. Less than a month later I had a staph infection on my penis and had to get an emergency circumcision – it was painful and bloody – and it was also something that everyone laughed about. (Even my Mom cracked jokes as I was taking codeine like candy.) 'The Surgeons' was written afterward, while I still had a towel under me wherever I sat. The myths are getting closer, and sometimes they bite..."

And then there is another of Webb's more provocative sales to *Interzone* (albeit for different reasons), "The Literary Fruitcake" (IZ 113). Where on earth did this one come from? "A friend of mine and I were talking about the truly wonderful English custom of reading a ghost story on Christmas Day. She called me on the eve of her Yule party, saying that everyone was bringing something to read, and that she wanted me to do so. There are always many jokes about how many owners a fruitcake can have, and drawing from this, I pulled out my *Encyclopedia Britannica* and whomped the story up in about four hours. It turns out that no one was bringing anything to read to the party, she'd merely thought she'd get some free entertainment from me. The story is fun however, and I've got good marks from all the readers of the collection in which it appeared, *A Spell for the Fulfilment of Desire*."

I mentioned the first story of his that I had personally read, "The Divorce." As with much of Webb's best work, it is short and pungent. "I had not known whether or not it was successful until now. The great test of writing is whether somebody remembers it. There are things I read yesterday that I don't recall, but some material I read 20 years ago in High School remains as fresh as though I just put it down. I was with my wife Rosemary in a local used bookstore. There was a cheap edition of Saki. I asked her if she'd ever read 'Sredni Vashtar.' When she hadn't I insisted we buy the book. She recited the ending from memory, while she read. I got a couple of words wrong, but on the whole it'd remained with me for 22 years. I think we forget that the word 'Muse' means Reminder. *Musa causa mihi memoriae*."

Is he surprised that his work goes down well in England, given that the British have a different mentality?



"Actually my stuff does better in Germany," he replies. "I have a book in German that does not exist in English. America is not ruled by literary mediocrity – but by the most evilly bloodsucking distribution system for periodicals and books in the world. As a consequence, anything original – that might fail – is shunned. The Brits have a lot more daring, partially because of smaller scale, and partially because the reading public is more prone to try new things... Also I have stuff published in India, Italy, Russia, Germany, Norway, France, Mexico, Italy, Japan, China... that I know of. Some places published without contacting or paying me – such as Italy and Russia, but in Italy's case it lead to a sale to Sr. Piergiorgio, for his *Avant-Pop* anthology."

Don Webb has published in many smaller publications; and he explains his reasons for doing so in matter-of-fact terms. "For example, the story I wrote about a man magically compelled to fuck a park bench, which changes into a story about being forced to watch a movie of man being magically compelled to fuck a park in a burning movie theatre, didn't for some obscure reason appeal to mass-publication magazines." He's got a point. "The worst thing anyone ever said that bothered me, was that some of my work stank of vomit. He was dead-on accurate. It was Dan Raphael of *nrg*. It made me a much more serious writer, looking for my own themes rather than doing other people's. (Now many much worse things have been said; but they're so far off the mark, that not only do they not bother me, I can't recall them.) The best thing anyone said about my writing was (more-or-less) 'You know that story you wrote a few years ago in *Asimov's*, well I didn't like it, and I didn't understand it, and I think about it every few months, and I go back and reread it and I don't like it.'"

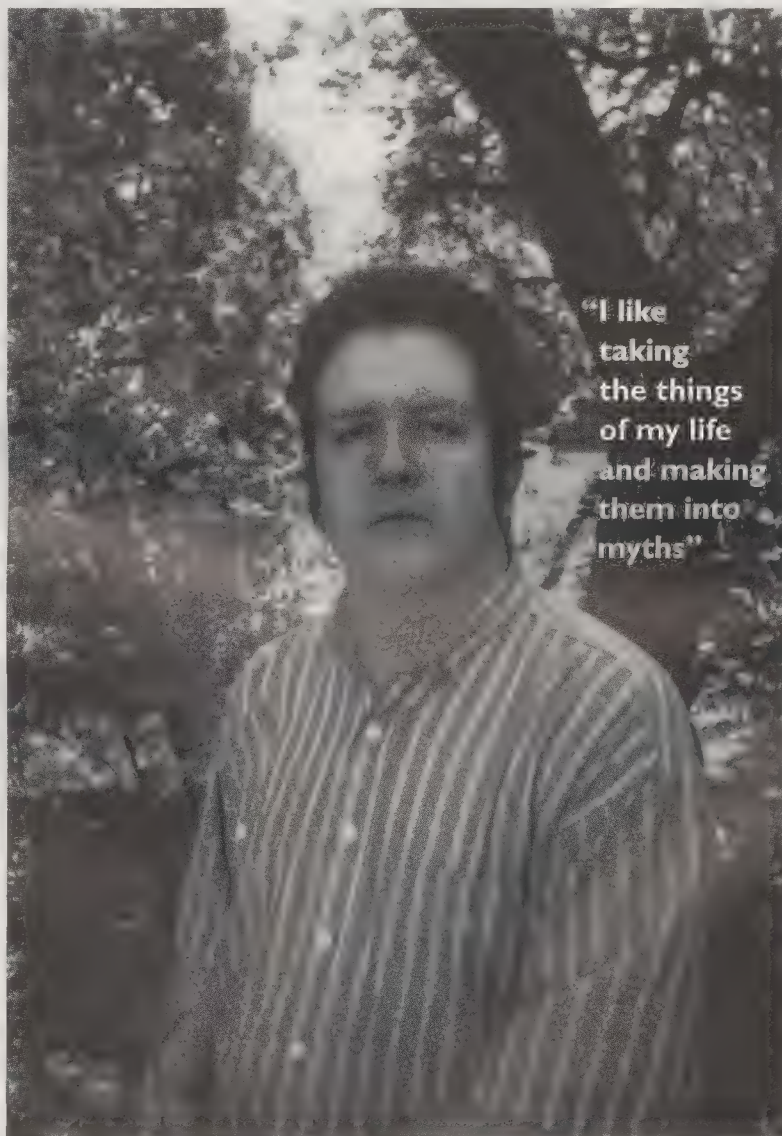
What is his favourite of his rarer stories and why? "That's tough. I'm not really a fan of my own work. (I don't dislike my work the way some writers do.) I tend to enjoy the creating of it, so much more than later

consumption; the creation counts. That said, I love a little sketch I did called 'Seven-Four Planting.' It was a prose poem about fireworks. I like taking the things of my life and making them into myths. If other people learn to do that, then they'll learn what I'm trying to teach. The story appears only in a very limited-edition book, *The Bestseller and Other Stories* from Chris Drumm Books, 1993."

His early influences were varied. "William Seward Burroughs was my biggest influence, followed by Howard Phillips Lovecraft. My brothers, who are 14 years older than me, had left a copy of *The Dunwich Horror and Other Tales* at home when they were in graduate school. Later they left behind *Naked Lunch*. Since I was forbidden to go in their room or touch their things, I immediately did so... Burroughs taught me three things. One: the importance of rhythm in prose. Two: the power of voice as a mood setter. And Three: that you could write about anything. This doesn't just mean writing about sex and so forth; it also means changing from sex to politics to nostalgia in a single page..." Referring

to idealistic emulation, Webb remarks: "I did the Burroughs thing way too long." (To this day, one of Burroughs' novels, *Cities of the Red Night*, would be among Webb's desert island discs. The other four would be "Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon, the complete Cordwainer Smith short stories, *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, and *A History of Religious Ideas* by Mircea Eliade.")

What did Lovecraft, his other inspiration, mean to him? "Lovecraft taught me four things. One: one's personal obsessions get the writing done. Two: it's more important to convey a mood than to tell a story. Three: real wonder comes from the interplay of the cosmic and the local. The art of the writer is to cause a shift in the imagination of the reader between polar extremes, so that after the story has been read, the reader will be able to make such shifts in his or her own imagination from the mundane worlds they find themselves in. Four: Lovecraft taught me the power of the imaginary book as a Symbol for the (collective) unconscious – which lead to my later literary tastes such as Borges and Sorrentino."



The talk turns to dreams and ideas.

"At the beginning of a writing career, the writer of the fantastic should have many strange, vivid and weird dreams – because his or her unconscious is trying to get through. As his or her mastery of dealing with that realm grows, he or she will need fewer Wyrld Dreams and will have the same sort of 'It's the last day of school and I haven't studied for my test' garbage that mankind is heir to. My strange dreams are very few now, but most do wind up in my fiction or poetry. I would never reveal a recurring dream any more than I would give someone my bank ID number; the keys to my soul are mine. Once I've learned them, I will share them. I would advise others to do the same..."

"I've travelled some, Germany, the UK, all around the States, but my fiction tends to be local. I mean, why write something about Stonehenge? – it is its own wonder. Write some-

thing about your neighbour's back yard. That's enchantment. Ideas are easy. You'll never be able to write down all the stories for which you have ideas. The tough thing is making those ideas interesting to others, with voice and setting. It's fun when someone else 'gets it.' Last night I was at a public reading, where the actor doing the Mr Sherman role in the film *Blue Harvest*, a short film I co-wrote, which will be filmed in Austin this fall, recited the voice-over monologue. I can't tell you how much of a relief it was to hear the crowd laugh at the jokes. Now of course a lot of that was the actor, Paul Watts, but even so, it was a great moment.

"The best idea seldom makes the best fiction. For example I had an idea this week about a serial killer that kills performance artists with a chainsaw, and everyone watching thinks it's part of their act. Well, that's it: all idea, no story there. Maybe you can connect that with the idea of this woman that slept with Apollo, and he gave her the ability to be the best actress in the world: but they have this lover's tiff, see, and he sours the gift by making everyone think she's crap. So she's working the performance-art circuit, and doing stuff that would make Shakespeare weep, but everyone just boos at her.

"Then the killer comes in, followed by the policeman, who just happens to be the world's best composer (but no one knows it because he had the same sort of bad love affair with Athena), and then just before the killer cuts the artist in two – the detective really hears her Talent, and he's so inspired that he writes a great dirge for her. That should make everyone cry their eyes out. But of course since he's under a curse no one can really hear it. So he plays it on his home piano, and broadcasts it into space, where he's been sending all his music for years. And millennia later, this alien civilization which has been listening avidly to his broadcasts (they aren't under the Curse, you dig?), hears the dirge. It's so sad they all kill themselves. The End.

"See: all idea, no story. Someone will turn this into a fantasy trilogy. You watch."

When I asked Don Webb if there was anything else he would like to bring to my attention he replied, "Well, I hope you mention my *Letters to the Fringe* URL. I think the time has come for people to start thinking of writers as what we really are: people running the Red Queen's Race. We all try (and in rare and wonderful moments succeed) to get beyond the burgeoning possibilities of the world and suggest some new ones. The best thing we can hope for from our fans is that they occasionally give us some kind of sports drink as we run off toward that never-ending horizon.

None of us will make it, and most of us will be sitting in our lawn chairs when some of the readers of this interview come jogging past, passing us sweaty old men and women as they take up the race. We will cheer you on as you pass. We promise, huff, pant, gasp..."

So, here goes. Those with access to the Internet might be interested in investigating any of the following three sites:

<http://www.euro.net/mark-space/DonWebb2.html>

<http://www.fringeware.com/dwebb/>

<http://cyberpsychos.netonecom.net/fringe>

Webb is fascinated by the Internet, and displays a good deal of fiction there, for free. When a cold-minded sod was sending hate mail to a colleague a little while ago, I mentioned the fact to Webb. He replied, "The Internet is the home of the powerless, and therefore the cruel. Any place that lets you put up a fake name, and hurl insults and threats is a great link to the inner teenager..." He goes further now. "The Internet is a great vampire that sucks at the hope of good writing, because you can get positive feedback immediately. In that it is a bane. But it lets people get together. I co-edited a book that appeared in Mexico (with Mauricio-Jose Schwarz of *Frontera de Espejos Rotos*). I never met my co-editor face-to-face. I have collaborated on stories with net-folk like Clifford Pickover and seen neither hide nor hair of him. Like any new media, it both opens and closes doors."

All that said, Webb sends to friends a list of useful website addresses, on the following criterion: "These interest me." They reveal a little about

who Don Webb is. "CNN has an article about Internet addiction and its relation to other mental health disorders," he writes, before adding: "None of which affect the readers of my column, who are healthy, wealthy, and sexy." He talks of a (rather alarming, actually) fondness for pyrotechnics; about one of his "favourite Australian magazines of dark paganism and weirdness, *Ninth Night*" as though he knows of a dozen such periodicals. He talks about anything that takes his fancy. "Willie Siros, who runs 'Adventures in Crime and Space,' Austin's premier Science Fiction and Mystery Shop on Sixth St. across from Katz's, was honoured for 94 years of continuous service to the field, by being allowed ten minutes away from his display in the Dealer's room while his brother Chuck and second cousin twice-removed Scott Cupp tended the store." (Made me laugh, anyway.) He talks about "William Browning Spencer, Neal Barrett and Bradley Denton – who are the Austin writers better than me. (Kind of scary how much better.)" About a site offering experimental writing and a "Geek Poet Bingo site," and even about the personal business of when he accidentally sent some erotic e-mail to the wrong address. "It took me a few days to discover this. I was very proud of the poem I wrote, a small erotic dialogue on the interplay of Knowing and Not-Knowing a lover's mind and body with images drawn from the *Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*. So every day when I checked my e-mail I would scan for a message from her. Had she seen it? Did she like it? Had I embarrassed her with my ardour, or merely impressed her as a bad poet? As a dinner grew near, I had begun to wonder if she would meet me at all, because one of the messages had some data about finding the restaurant."

But rather than end on that, I will return to Webb on dreams. What is his biggest dream, as a writer and otherwise?

"My biggest dream as a writer is that a hundred years after my death, someone will put down one of my books and say, 'Gee I wish I could send that guy a thankyou note!' My biggest dream otherwise is that my wife and our mistress and I get a big house in the Texas Hill Country, with three offices so we can all write and not drive each other crazy – and of course a big bedroom with certain custom devices... (I know: pretty much the same dream as everyone). Of course somehow, we have made good and can afford to do naught but write and screw, and take road trips to rural Texas towns for our antiquarian book-buying jaunts."

Good luck to him.



I wasn't in the habit of going to New Age bookstores. I don't have a shelf full of quartz crystals, a Navaho dream-catcher hanging from my wall, or a little statue of Shiva acting as god of knickknacks. I went into the New Atlantis Bookstore to get out of the rain. A sudden downpour had caught me during my evening walk, so I figured I would wait out the worst of the storm inside my neighbourhood occultnik shop.

There was a big display – a huge pile, in fact – of a slim trade paperback called *Revelations of the Second Circle* by David Davis. Now it wasn't the book's red-and-black cover that attracted me, although that was nicely done, it was the author's name. I knew a guy named David Davis. It must have been about 15 years ago, when I had lived in Lubbock, Texas. I wondered if the book was by him. So I picked it up and flipped to the back page.

"About the author. David Davis, author of the best-selling *Revelations of the First Circle*, is an expert on American Indian lore. He lives in Gilliam, Oklahoma, a site of ancient Amerindian mystery religions. He is a well-known writer of fiction and poetry, having dazzled the world for the past decade. He is busily at work on his next book, *Revelations of the Third Circle*."

It had to be the same guy, there couldn't be two people named David Davis in Gilliam, Oklahoma. What a kick in the butt. I bought the book, resolving to contact David via the publishers, Byatis Press. So Dave had finally become famous, or at least famous in the crystal-and-smudge-stick circle.

I started to tell the counter girl that I knew Dave, but I figured she would take it for a come-on line, which it in fact would have been. I just asked her if the book sold well, and she asked if I was kidding – all those copies would be gone in a week.

I was so excited that one of our little circle had made good that I forgot about the cold rain. I stuck the book in my shirt and I ran home. David Davis. I couldn't believe it.

I had gone to school at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. I majored in computer science. One semester I had been in need of an easy "A," so I had taken a course called Science Fiction Honors, I think that was what it was called. Anyway, if you wrote a story, you got an "A." I wrote a story about a guy who takes his friends to a weird cavern, becomes possessed by some ancient god, and kills them – "Diary Found in an Abandoned Jeep." I got my "A." For awhile, mainly during summer school, I toyed with the idea of becoming rich and famous by

# The Jest of Yig

Don Webb

writing. There was a little group of us who tried our hand at that sort of thing. Juliee Grover, Nancy Turner, David Davis, Ralph Holaday, John Kanos, and me, Michael Dee. We wrote little stories, read marketing books with great interest, and mailed our terrible verse to magazines both large and microscopic.

David sold one to a mystery magazine, and we all thought he was on his way to fame and fortune.

He wanted it bad too. Not just the fame and money we all assumed were around the corner, he wanted to write the great works of literature and philosophy. He was ready to be Sartre and Joyce; after all he was 21 and had been brought up in Oklahoma – what more life experience could he need?

David would spend the nights talking about what he was going to do. Fun to listen to at first, but deadly dull by the end of the summer. Wanting to think the great thoughts of all time is nice and all – but it's better if occasionally you think some of them.

In my heart I hoped he would make it. I was taking an Assembly

Language class that semester, and retaking Differential Equations, so I was a little too busy to write.

David had talked his folks into giving him the summer off to write. David was a little fat, a little spoiled, but he could talk anybody into anything. David was handsome enough to make it with the girls, because of his thick black hair and dark eyes. Like many Oklahomans, he was the beautiful result of Indian and European heritage.

Then near the end of the summer, late, late August – I don't remember the date – David's father grew gravely ill. Cancer.

So David went home to Gilliam, Oklahoma. Which is fairly close to nowhere, being between the towns of Binger and Lookeba in Caddo County.

We called on him in the fall, after his dad had died. He was helping his mom with the estate, which included some land and a few oil wells. Her health wasn't that great either. He had "sold" a poem or two, and was expecting great things, just as soon as his life settled down.

He didn't come back in the spring. I graduated, had a great job, a whirlwind romance, lost the job, married, had a lousy job, lost the marriage, moved, had a mediocre job, moved, bought a house, hadn't talked to anyone from college in six or seven years. I lived in Houston working at the job I hoped would last till my retirement, as a programmer for Alkemi Semiconductor.

So Dave had made it.

The book began this way:

"Thoughts in our minds are like snakes in a field, the snake veers from sight to blindness, curving not to here and not to there. The field hopes that the snake will curve and coil over its most delicate parts, so that it may shudder in orgasm. The snake, the serpent in the Eden of our minds, sees not the field, and knows not Nug, the maker of the field, nor Yeb, the gardener thereof. In the First Circle we learned how to make our thoughts most alive, so that we might see our minds from their perspective; in this Circle I will reveal more of Chief Gray Eagle's lore so that we may make the fields more aware of the snakes."

The name "Chief Gray Eagle" looked like a pretty transparent fiction, somewhat after the figure of "Don Juan" in Carlos Castaneda's books. Apparently Dave had conjured this figure to be the source of his wisdom. Well, I thought, whatever sells the product. I read on.

The book didn't turn out to be the nonsense I thought it would be. Oh sure it was full of Oooga-Booga names like Yig, Nug, Yeb, and Byatis – but some of the things about the "unnatural nature" of consciousness made sense, the observations about how our personality was like a constrictive skin that should be shed regularly, really got me thinking about my life – my mistakes and triumphs, and the speculations about the purpose and nature of sentient life – although alien (and maybe a bit frightening) – to me seemed correct.

I had meant to write Dave right away, but you know how such intentions are. When I did write him care of Byatis Press, I included my e-mail address, but his letter came back snail mail.

Dear Mike,

I'm not on-line. It's hard to get a provider out here in the boonies. I tried it for awhile via a long distance provider, which quickly became too much of a habit. I'm glad you like the second book. Books Three and Four have just gone to print and I am busily doing Five.

I am thinking of setting up a school here, where I can give one-on-one instruction, or small classes, something like that. I'm getting my lawyer to look into the tax aspects, insurance liability things like that.

You should come out. I've found something here, something I can't talk about in the books, but something real and mysterious. I want the old gang out here. I want to show you things, things you've never dreamt of. I'd like you to be the first.

Besides, the lake is pretty and there's some great caving. I remember how fond you were of caves.

Best,  
David.

He and I wrote back and forth a few times. I read Book Three in the series, which was more disturbing than profound. Book Four didn't get distributed here. Each time I wrote I always put down my phone number, but Dave never put down his – and directory assistance wouldn't provide it.

Then Alkemi Semiconductor laid off half of its staff, and I applied for a job at Wisconsin Data Systems. I got

the job and a month to move, and I rented a truck.

I decided to go through Oklahoma, drop in on Dave.

While I was passing through Dennison, Texas on my way to Gilliam, I caught the tail end of a radio broadcast mentioning David's latest book and a riot. I listened to the radio for hours afterward, but never heard it again.

David was well known but not well liked in Gilliam. I pulled into Compton's Pay and Save, and asked the woman at the counter if she knew where David's ranch was. She looked disgusted, asking me if I was one of "them." "Them" turned out to be homosexuals, and she told me that David had AIDS. She told me how to find the ranch.

David did not have AIDS, or if he did the symptoms were unlike those of the friend of mine who had died. David was a good four inches shorter than he had been in Lubbock, his eyes were covered with a yellow film, and his skin looked awful. Scaly and tight-looking.

The ranch was about 30 acres, with picturesque windmill and pasture and very dry-looking cottonwood trees. There were some low hills in the southwest corner, and a dry creek bed meandering though its centre.

One of the first things David told me was they were having a dry year, driest year ever recorded. His voice was dry too. Raspy like he didn't talk much.

David met me in the driveway, glad as he could be.

"Come in, I'll get you a Coke," he said.

As I stepped out of the truck, a rattling started – and I froze. It had been a long time since I lived anywhere rattlesnakes were, but I remembered the sound good.

It was a big diamondback, coiled in the prickly pear growing in front of the pale green ranch house. David reached over into the cactus and *picked it up*.

"You scoot now!" and he gently tossed it on the lawn, where it snaked away toward the white wooden fence that separated the yard from the pasture.

"They can be pesky, this time of year," he said. I was too breathless to say anything. I followed him into the air-conditioned house.

The ranch house was a delight. It was a three-bedroom split-level house built in the 1950s. The curtains had a cowboy-boots and yellow-rope pattern – and all the furniture was covered in Naugahyde. The bar had a Formica top, and brands had been burned into the wood panelling. Prickly pear and cholla grew in the front yard. I had to keep fighting down the impulse to yell, "Yee-Haw!"

He got me a soda. "You can have the run of the house. The little building in the back is where I do my writing, and it's closed to all. That way nobody ever sees the typos and false starts."

We visited for a few minutes. How various people were, the sorry state of politics, which were the best highways to take to and from.

The house smelled a little musty.

I eventually asked him about his health.

"Mike, I doubt that there's more than four or five human beings on this planet healthier than me. I'm undergoing a sort of self-treatment right now, according to some of the methods mentioned in my fourth book, so I might look a little peeked. But I'm healthy, I plan on being healthy for many, many more years to come."

"I heard on the radio that you had some trouble with your fourth book," I said.

He hissed. I later was to discover that the hissing was his form of laughter.

"I may have gone a little too far with the chapter on dark Han. Han, like his siblings Yig and Byatis, is a divinatory god. Divination isn't the easy feel-good actions your local palm-reader might do for you. To know the future, you've got to open yourself up to it. I let people see things too clearly, especially in Dayton, Ohio, I guess." He hissed some more.

I was beginning to wish I had read all four of his published books, instead of only number two. So I asked, "Dave, of your books, which would you say was the mildest?"

"Oh number two, without a doubt, I probably made it too easy."

I decided to stay away from criticism and the weirdo folklore as much as I could. I talked about my job, and got David to talk about his lifestyle.

After his mother had died, he found himself in the possession of a small income. The family owned some land to the south that had two vacation cabins, ten oil wells, a gas well, and a little pasturage. His mom and dad owned part of all the banks around. So as long as he didn't expect too much, all his needs could be taken care of. He wrote stories and poems and placed them in little magazines. Got up when he liked, went to bed when he liked. His only regret was that he didn't have someone to go into town for him. He really didn't have anything to talk about with the townsfolk. He didn't want to discuss his philosophical or magical interests with them, since he had the image of idiot villagers storming the castle by night – and since he didn't watch TV, he couldn't talk to them about *Breastwatch*.

He fixed dinner for me – well, beans and cornbread.

His medical, or whatever, treatment required he fast today.

I agreed to spend the night, tomorrow and tomorrow night.

We played chess like we used to in Lubbock, and he beat my butt just like he used to in Lubbock.

As the moonless night darkened, we moved out to the lawn furniture outside the house, to watch the stars, which are a thousand times closer in the country than in the city.

"That sky looks permanent, doesn't it? So much more permanent than human life? But there are ways of living that are more permanent than that sky. There are people that live longer than the stars. Of course they don't look like people. They're not the people of this world, that's for sure. This world is a painted corpse, and the corpse has begun to decay underneath. Mankind is just beginning to smell the stench."

"So, Dave, you think you have the answer for mankind?"

I was hoping for the answer *no*.

"There isn't a hope for mankind, but for some individuals maybe. Life worship, that's all there is. The people that were here before the Indians, they knew. They worshipped two great gods, Tulu and Yig. Tulu is the psyche, Yig is the life force. Big huge snake god. I know

what you're thinking, but it's not a Freudian thing. It's about renewal and growth. I'll be able to show you tomorrow, or maybe tonight if –"

There was a rattling in the darkness, interrupting his words.

David said, "Excuse me, I've got to see about that."

"Dave, that's a snake!"

"Snakes don't bother me."

He went off in the direction of the rattling. I couldn't be sure, but he seemed to bend over and pick up something, and keep walking. I heard something really sibilant, but it could have been the prairie wind hissing through the cottonwoods.

When he came back, he pulled his chair away from mine. He talked about how hard it was to get his books distributed, going to the book conventions, and so forth. He kept fidgeting and scratching. After awhile he said he needed to go write. I should go on to bed. Sometimes he wrote all night long.

The first thing I did when I got inside the house was look for a copy of the third book. There weren't many books in the house, mainly *Reader's Digest* condensed and collections of cartoons – all many years old. But I found one shelf of David's publications.

The third book was pretty hard for me to follow. It referred often to the Creole expression "Wete Po, Mete Po" – to remove the skin and put on a new skin. This was linked to some *peeling* process in secret Bizango societies of Haiti and to the *obeah* cults of primal Africa. David seemed to be arguing for a cross-cultural serpent cult with references to the work of Flemish necromancer Ludvig Prinn, who had written a book about serpents, *De Vermis Mysteriis*. There were translations from that text:

"The new skin that grows as the result of the scarification rites is considered an essential preliminary to the ecstasy of spirit possession. Those that laid the foundation for all in Valusia, did not need the rites, but men lacking the grace of Yig need to cultivate certain practices. These are hidden in shrines of a certain shape in serpent-filled regions. The rites return even if man dies out, they will outlive men, but men who are worthy of the rites will outlive them. These are the words, 'Yig is Yig, growing ever, Neb and Yug are the field and its keeper, Neb is milk and Yug is venom. Yig is Yig. Ixaxar nessek lesszar sin tod. Yig is Yig.' This is the secret of the fruit of life."

If this book had any of the morally-redeeming and thought-producing material of the second volume I couldn't find it. It made me feel that meaning was about to break into my head. As though my mind were keeping something at bay, something it knew from long ago, maybe from its own forming when the human race had made certain decisions.

I didn't like these thoughts and I didn't like what I had seen. I resolved to leave tomorrow. I was tired, too tired to think it all through, and I went to bed.

I think the next thing that happened may have been a dream. It didn't feel like a dream, but it didn't feel like the waking world either. Maybe it was in one of those

worlds David wrote about.

I found myself outside sitting in one of the lawn chairs. It was night, and David walked up carrying a bright blue lantern of strange design. He said something in a language unknown to me, and I felt very woozy, but I started to follow him. We walked toward the low hills on the corner of his property. We came up to a cave mouth, small, so we had to crawl in on our bellies. Every now and then, I tried to turn away, but David would hiss something at me, and I kept going on. We crawled on our bellies for a long way. David was very good at it.

We came to a big dark chamber.

Something was there, but I couldn't see it.

I could feel it looking at me.

I could feel it looking in me.

I could feel it looking out of me.

Then a big voice said, "No, he won't do."

David looked really mad, then really sad, then kind of scared. Then he said, "There are others."

David made two quick gestures with his hands, and everything spun round and round and I was in the bed and dawn was coming through the window, and I felt sick and I just managed to get to the toilet before I hurled.

I took a shower. I went back to bed.

"Hey, sleepy head, get up. Get a move on!" David was yelling in the kitchen. I think he had been yelling for awhile. I felt hung over. I looked at the clock. It was noon.

David's eyes were bright and active, his skin a fresh vibrant pink. He had a towel wrapped over his head. He was fixing a baloney sandwich for me.

"I didn't think you'd ever wake up, that road trip must have taken it out of you."

I had a quick breakfast and told him that I thought it was better if I hit the road today. He didn't protest at all.

I was in the truck and away in about ten minutes.

Two things really bothered me.

One David didn't have any eyebrows this morning, and I thought from the way that towel hung, he must have shaved his head, or lost his hair in another manner.

Two, I had some scratches on my abdomen, as though I had crawled on the ground.

The new job had lots of overtime which was really welcome. I spent some time tracking down the old writing gang from Lubbock; three of them were on the Net, so it wasn't hard. I told them that David had founded some goofy religion and that he might be trying to get them to go to his ashram, and that they should plead time constraints.

David had written to Juliee, but the others had never heard of any of his books. I didn't say more, and I put down the whole experience to stress and maybe some subtle drug that David had put in the cornbread.

In early October, *Revelations of the Fifth Circle* came out.

There was a minor media storm. Some communities banned it, reputable occult distributors refused to carry it. Certain psychologists lectured on it, and I believe that a couple of people did their thesis on its contents.

David had mentioned me in the dedication, "To Michael Dee, who wasn't chosen." He mentioned a lot of

people, professors at Texas Tech, Thomas Pynchon "for V which came close," and various Indian ethnographers who had worked near Gilliam during the Depression.

I was apparently the only one with a registered phone.

It took a couple of days to unregister it, and two days more for the reporters to find me.

They called me at work, till I lost my job.

It was a very unpleasant month.

A reporter did go visit David on the ranch. I had given her the address. Her name was Helen Vaydeux. She had called me till I thought my ears would fall off. I figured she could get the proper authorities to do whatever it is that proper authorities do. Served her right after bugging the hell out of me.

She visited me afterward.

"The little guy's going to write a sixth book. He thinks it's all very funny."

That's not such an odd statement, except that she made it 44 times in a row, after I had called the ambulance. I understand that she's still saying it.

I thought about that long and hard. I had given her the address so she would stop bugging me.

I was responsible for her madness.

I decided that it was time to end David Davis's writing career.

I had a gun from my days in Houston. It was even an untraceable gun that I had bought from a guy at Alkemi, who was a distrust-the-government gun nut. I had lived in a high-crime neighbourhood and I figured it was a good idea to own one. I even spent some time at a couple of firing ranges.

The first strategy would be to talk to David, but if that didn't look valid, I had a gun.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought I could get away with it.

If nobody saw me turn into the ranch road, and if David were alone, I could pick him off, and set the place afire with some gasoline, and drive back home.

At least I would have felt that I had done something. I dreamed about Helen Vaydeux a lot, sometimes two or three times a night.

"The little guy's going to write a sixth book. He thinks it's all very funny."

I went in late October. The humour of the timing had escaped me until I noticed the Trick-or-Treat decorations at every gas station I stopped at. I didn't do much in the way of disguise. I got a shirt at the Goodwill that had MARK written over the heart and the name of an exterminating service on the shoulders. I got a matching gimme cap from the same outfit, and I wore dark sunglasses, something I never wear. Half way there I called one of my co-workers asking if he wanted to go to a movie that was showing in town. I had overheard him say that he had already seen it. He turned me down, so I said I would go alone. So I even had an alibi.

It was a bleak trip. The prairie was dead. It had been a dry year.

I got to the ranch near sunset. Caddo County isn't very populated, I hadn't seen a car since I passed through

Lookeba. There were weeds growing in the cracks in the driveway. The lawn hadn't been raked of its cottonwood leaves.

I stepped out of my car.

Something slithered away under the leaves. I started as if to shoot, but I didn't want to give David advance warning. I hated the loud *crunch* of the leaves as I walked up to the front door. I felt sure I could be heard for miles and miles.

On the door was a small official notice that the power was going to be cut off on the first of October. Today was Saturday the 26th, tomorrow daylight savings time ended.

I laughed when I thought involuntarily of that.

I tried the door. It was unlocked.

The house was dark. But even in the orange light coming through the cowboy curtains, I could tell it was dusty. No one lived here. I looked into the bedroom where I had slept. The bed was unmade, the copy of *Revelations of the Third Circle* lying on the floor where I had left it.

I sprinted out to the car, and got a flashlight.

Maybe I was too late, and he had moved after Helen had visited him, but I would check the outbuilding.

It was one of those portable metal buildings you can buy at larger hardware stores. Tan and black, it had no windows and one door. It was wired for electricity, had there been any.

It too was unlocked.

The smell was awful, but the sight was worse.

It was large enough for a cheap metal desk, and chair, with a personal computer and printer. There were two filing cabinets, and a few boxes of paper.

Snake skin, the white translucent ugly skin of shedding, covered the floor and desk to the depth of four inches. Some of it began blowing away because I had opened the door.

Some of it had human hair attached to it. Thick black hair. David's hair.

I picked up some of the skin.

It wasn't from a snake, at least not the fragment that I picked up. It was from a human hand. A small human hand.

"The little guy's going to write a sixth book. He thinks it's all very funny."

The little guy.

I didn't think it was over, I wanted to check that cave, the cave of the near-dream. If there was anything living there I would kill it. Especially if it was small.

It was dark before I crossed over to the cave mouth. It was a small opening, and it took me a while to find it. It was cold too. I hadn't packed a coat. I guess I just didn't figure murder was something you dressed warmly for. Of course since what I was going to kill wasn't human, or at least I was guessing not too human any more, it might not have been murder. I doubted killing varmints was against Oklahoma law.

I looked long and hard at that little opening before I ventured in. I didn't like the idea of crawling into something. It was like sticking my whole body into a mouth

that could bite me at any time.

I put the flashlight in my right hand and the gun in my left. And I crawled. And crawled. And crawled. Until I was sure I must have been crawling for a hundred years. Every wriggle I thought, I am going to be bitten right in the face by a rattlesnake, or the tunnel is going to be too small, or David will kill me by spitting venom in my face. I crawled, and every single muscle in my body hurt. I had cramps and pains in places that I had had no idea had muscles in them. And I crawled. I was beginning to cry from the pain, and I needed to go to the bathroom desperately, and I had died a thousand deaths when I pulled myself into the big chamber.

"Put out the light. It hurts my eyes."

It was a big deep voice from a big thing. I saw part of its coils covered in brown and green and scarlet scales. I put out the light.

"You were rejected. Why are you here?" it asked.

"I've come to find David."

"You are too late."

"What are you?"

"I am Victor Heauton. I await the liberation of Yig. I have been here for almost a hundred years. You have come to burn his house, haven't you? Yes, I see that. If you burn his house to the ground I will let you live. I did not like him, he bothered me all the time. I spend the centuries thinking the great thoughts for Yig. Yig needs many heads to think his thoughts in, until the time he breaks free of the earth that imprisons his miles and miles of coils. I am insignificantly small in comparison to him. Yig is Yig."

"What happened to him?"

"He sought Yig's blessing. Yig is Yig. If you become his child, you think great thoughts and grow wise. You shed your skin, and can think new thoughts when the radiations of Yig's mind touches the new flesh. Or if you are a small, greedy little creature, you shed your skin and grow smaller. You become nothing. It is Yig's jest. Your friend was very small, he wanted fame and money – what are these to the eons? I had made myself ready for Yig. I had read the great books, travelled to the secret sites of the world with my friend Alzono Typer, I had known love and loss and war. I wasn't destroyed by Yig's revelations. Your mind and soul were too middle-sized. You can't grow big like me. You wouldn't shrink like him. And certainly he could not come to you in your dreams and make you bear his children."

"So he wasted away?"

The answer convinced me to leave the tunnel, and burn down David's house. I smashed the computer, and I burned all the horror of the piles of shed skin.

I drove home.

I spend some money every year to send a Christmas basket to Helen, other money to buy and burn David's books.

The great serpent, that had been Victor Heauton, had said, "The little one's voice was too shrill. I ate him."

# GRANDMA'S BUBBLE

## *the Speaking Clock*

Grandma didn't see too well. Shauna used to sit behind her chair, the one that had grey and white foam crawling out of the ragged wounds in its back, and slowly, stealthily, make her way round to the front. She made no sound. The old wooden boards out on the veranda complained a little if she moved too fast: it hurt them. So she moved as slowly as she could. It left her hands and her knees dark with dust, dust that somehow lodged itself deep inside the lines of her palms. She had to use soap to wash it out, soap and hot water, and her mother told her over and over that there wasn't enough of either to go around. At last Grandma would notice Shauna, sitting cross-legged in front of her as if she had appeared from nowhere. Her skin was as gnarled as the wood of the floorboards, and almost the same colour. She wouldn't notice the dust on her grand-daughter's hands, though. It seemed only parents noticed things like that.

It was a warm night, and the sun was rolling down past the edge of the broken lands. Nothing moved; all was quiet. A soft breeze wandered the desert, sighing, telling everything it found to stay silent and still. Shauna could hear it whispering, over to the north: *Shh, shh.*

Maybe Grandma had heard it too, because when she spoke, it was in a low voice, almost a whisper.

"One thing we didn't have when I was your age," she said, "was sunsets like this. They were pretty good even back then, though I suppose most people didn't have the time to sit and watch them. But now they're something else. No they're like a little glimpse of the light of Heaven."

Shauna nodded seriously, and Grandma began a chuckle, which broke into a cough.

"You can't imagine it, can you?" she said, kindly. She looked out over the desert again, and this time she wasn't watching the sunset, but something further away. Shauna followed her gaze, but couldn't see anything. What could Grandma be looking at, with her fading vision? She didn't screw up her eyes, the way she usually did when something was far away. Instead she watched it quite easily, whatever it was, for a while; then she said: "Even your mother couldn't really imagine it. I don't know why I should expect things to be any different with you. All of that's gone. Everything from that time. I can't describe it to you, not really – I can't make you see it. I wish I could. But what use would it be to you?"

"Tell me about it," Shauna said.

Grandma took off her small, round glasses and wiped the lenses with the corner of her sleeve. She kept her eyes on that distant point, though, the point that Shauna couldn't see. She seemed to be able to see it just as easily, with only her eyes to help her.

"How much have I told you already?" she wondered. "You know about cars and trains, and aeroplanes. And zoos. And cities, how they used to be." She sounded sad, so Shauna sat closer to the chair. "I suppose those things aren't so hard to understand. They're just things you know, made bigger and better and stranger. But I wish I could describe all the little things. Stamps. Hearing-aids. Personal stereos. Electric can-openers. The Speaking Clock."

Shauna frowned. "Like the one in the hallway?"

"No." The old woman laughed, softly, gently. "That's a Grandfather Clock. That was old when I was born." She fixed the glasses back on the bridge of her nose. Then she looked away from the horizon, down to the girl at her side. "The only thing from back then that still works," she said, smiling, "and it's the oldest thing we have." She shook her head. "You won't have memories like mine when you reach my age, but you'll have memories of your own. I wish you could see what I've seen; but maybe it's better if you don't. You might start asking difficult questions, like why a woman isn't allowed to ride a horse."

Without thinking, Shauna asked: "Why isn't a woman allowed to ride a horse?"

Grandma only sighed, and shook her head again.

Shauna said: "Were you allowed to ride horses back then?"

"Yes. And a few other things too. But it's better not to ask these questions. Better to keep silent. I only think about them because I remember how things were."

"Okay. I won't ask again."

"Good," Grandma said softly, though by her voice it seemed she didn't think it good at all. "Now. Can you see your father's cart, out on the road? He'll be tired, working out in this heat. Be a good girl, and put some milk to boil on the stove."

That night Shauna couldn't sleep. It was too hot, and

the desert creatures were howling. They sounded as if they were in terrible pain. Shauna had seen one, once, that her brother had caught. It had been the wrong shape, somehow. No wonder the creatures were in pain. She didn't know whether she was afraid of them, or only sorry for them.

She heard her father pacing up and down outside, on the veranda. It was his footsteps she heard, not her uncle's or her brother's: slow, and sure, and regular. He would have the old shotgun tucked under his arm, carelessly. That was something else from the old days that still worked. Grandma had forgotten about it.

At night, the voices were more insistent. The bed-posts were bickering with each other, as usual. The threadbare curtain sighed its heavy sigh. The door grumbled softly to itself, and shifted uncomfortably on its hinges.

Shauna climbed out of bed, and patted the mattress. "I won't be long," she said. "I only want to visit the clock out in the hall." The bed said nothing; it only shrugged its heavy shoulders.

Out of her room she crept, making no sound. She was good at keeping quiet. Down the corridor and through the cold, dark kitchen. Shauna welcomed the cool air on her face. It whispered to her as it crept in through the half-open window, and she put a finger to her lips, to silence it. The carving knife leered at her from the table top, and she scowled in reply. The doors were watching her, and she kept close to the wall as she tiptoed through the hallway, to where the clock was standing.

It was tall, taller than she was, even taller than her brother. When she came close, she could hear it ticking. Like the footsteps of her father, outside: slow, and sure, and regular. Grandma was wrong about the clock, too. It did speak, like everything else. It even had a face.

"Clock?"

"Yes?" The clock's voice was deep, every word spoken slowly, precisely.

"Do you remember the time before?"

"The time before what?"

Shauna frowned. Sometimes the clock played games with her. She thought it was laughing at her, making fun of her for all the things she didn't know. "You know what I mean. The time before. When there were." She tried to remember what Grandma had said. "Cars and cities and stereos and stamps." The words meant so little to her.

The clock was silent for a moment. Shauna waited, listening to the slow beat of the mechanism, watching the pendulum swing back and forth. A tiny spot of light raced from side to side across the brass weight. The clock was thinking.

At last the clock said: "I remember. What do you want to know?"

"I want to see what it was like. Grandma says she can't make me see it."

"That's because you can't climb inside her," the clock explained. "To see what she saw, you have to look out through her eyes."

Shauna nodded.

"If you turn the little key," the clock whispered, "and climb inside of me, you can see out through my eyes. I don't know whether you should. But you can, if that's what you want."

So Shauna turned the little key, and stepped into the body of the clock. There was barely room for her, in the space where the pendulum swung. Maybe this was why her mother could never see, the way Grandma wanted her to see. She was too big to climb inside the clock. Shauna turned around, carefully, and looked out of the window in the front of the clock's body. Her fingertips were pressed against the sides; she could smell the old wood all around her.

She didn't know what she expected to see, when she looked back into the time before. She didn't know whether she would understand it. There was so much she didn't understand now, as it was; in the time before, she thought, things were probably even more confusing. They certainly sounded so, the way Grandma described them.

The pendulum swung, a single beat, and the scene outside moved away. Shauna saw a different place, a different house, another hallway. This one was wider, and the walls seemed to be of stone, not wood. There was a picture up on a wall, a picture too good to have been done by a person. It must be a photograph. She had seen a few amongst Grandma's things, in the box of old stuff in the storeroom. But those had been brown and faded, curling at the edges. The figures reduced to smudges and blurs. This one was sharp and full of colour. There were colours everywhere. The clothes of the people were full of colour. She saw a group of them going past, chattering. A couple were talking in strange words; another language, she realised. That was what Grandma meant by another language.

A man and a woman stopped nearby, talking. The woman looked familiar: she had wavy blonde hair, and bright blue eyes. It was Grandma. That was how she had looked, back in the time before. She looked different, but it was definitely her. The eyes were the same. They were still bright blue, even now, even though she didn't see that well any more. Shauna didn't recognise the man. He had a watch on his wrist, made out of a dull, black material that must have been plastic. There were no hands: the numbers were written on a little screen. There was a box at his belt, and a couple of tiny black wires trailed up and around his neck. He smelled funny: his skin had a strong, sickly-sweet scent, unnatural. Grandma didn't seem too bothered by it, though.

"Back for good," she was saying, in a hushed voice, as if she didn't want to be overheard; as if the wind had crept past just a moment before, warning her to be silent. She didn't notice the little girl watching from inside the grandfather clock. "I want to keep my feet firmly on the ground from now on."

"You don't mean that," the man told her. "You'd jump at the chance to go back. So would I. You know they're sending old people now? Isn't that great?"

Grandma made a face. "For how much longer, Charlie? The military wants a bigger slice of the cake.

Again. They'll probably get it, too."

"Then you'll have a place in history. You couldn't be the first woman, but you might be the last."

"Not funny. This is serious. If the budget is cut again before the trials are completed, then it will all have been a waste of time."

The man stared down at the floor. "It was a waste of time anyway, Barbara. I hate to say it, but. I don't see any future for pure research. Only research that furthers the Cause."

Some kind of bell was ringing, somewhere deeper inside the house. The two of them moved away, and then the scene itself swung out of sight. Suddenly, Shauna was back in the present, staring out at the bare wooden wall of the hallway. Where the photograph had been, there was a small icon pinned to the wall. She stepped out of the clock, and locked the door behind her with the little key.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"There isn't much more. Nothing that would interest you," the clock assured her. Shauna didn't know whether she could believe it, but she couldn't force it to show her more. The clock peered down at her and whispered: "I don't think I should have shown you anything. It can't help you. It's all gone, now."

"But I want to see more. I want to see where Grandma went."

"I can't show you that," the clock replied, and this time Shauna believed it. It continued: "I can only show you things I've seen. To see what your Grandmother saw, you have to look through her eyes. I told you before. Weren't you listening?"

"But how can I?" Shauna demanded.

The clock's voice dropped even lower, so that Shauna had to lean in close to catch the words at all. "Go to the storeroom. Find the box with all her old things. Look for the bubble. It can show you more."

Shauna crept away, through the kitchen once more, past the dark eyes of the doorways, and into the cold, dark storeroom. The shutters were closed; she had to scramble through the room in the dark, clambering over broken chairs which hadn't been fixed, and bundles of cloth, and old boxes and trunks, some empty, others filled with treasure. When she opened the shutters, the light fell in a silver shaft to the floor. Grandma's box was hiding in a shadow in the corner.

Inside was a red plastic ball, which Shauna couldn't think of a use for; a few old books tied together with string; a few pieces of plastic, still brightly-coloured after all this time, the remains of something bigger and brighter; tarnished, worthless coins and faded photographs, letters and papers and shiny silver discs. And, of course, there was the bubble.

It had been there as long as Shauna could remember. Every now and again, Grandma would bring out her things and go through them. Less and less often, as she grew older; but still, every few months, she would drag the box out and pull each thing from it, turning it over in her hands, looking through it, into the past. Sometimes, when she looked at the photos or read the letters, she would cry a little. Then she would

wipe her eyes, and her glasses too, as if they had been crying along with her. But she never brought out the bubble. Shauna knew it was there – she had crept into the storeroom many times, first to explore, later just to play. No one wanted to tell her about the bubble. No one wanted to explain. Not even Grandma, who always wanted to explain about the time before.

She lifted the bubble from the box. It was heavy, quite round, like a goldfish bowl; and, like a goldfish bowl, it was open at one side. Shauna had never seen a goldfish. But her mother used one of the bowls to carry water in, when everything else was full.

The bubble wasn't made of glass, though. It seemed to be plastic – though she wasn't sure how one thing could take so many different forms; plastic seemed to be both hard and soft, every colour, every shape, every texture. The bubble was see-through, like glass. It was heavy, like glass. But it wasn't glass.

It was watching her. It had guessed what she was going to do.

"Don't," it whispered to her. Its voice was like falling water. "Please don't"

"Why shouldn't I?" Shauna demanded.

"I can't stop you. But you shouldn't see what you would see through my eyes."

"Why not?" Shauna asked.

The bubble didn't reply.

Shauna waited a while, wondering what she should do. From somewhere outside the storeroom, she heard a sound, a soft, regular tapping. It might have been her father, still watching for prowling desert creatures, until her uncle took his turn; or it might have been the clock in the hall.

Biting her lip, Shauna raised the bubble to her face, and peered inside. The bubble caught its breath, and held it, waiting for her to put her head inside. It was too big for her head; the smooth, round lip reached almost to her shoulders. With an effort, she hauled the thing into the air, and slipped it over her head.

At first she could see nothing at all. Only darkness. She thought perhaps the bubble was some kind of trick, that you could see through it from the outside, but from the inside you could see nothing at all. But then she realised that the darkness wasn't the darkness you saw close by. It was the darkness you saw far away. She was staring into a huge area of black. It seemed to go on for ever. She saw tiny points of light, like stars but brighter, colder.

She felt as if she were floating. As if the thing really were a goldfish bowl, and she were down in the water. As if her body were as light as a feather, and could float upon the air. There was no sound but her own breathing, very loud, very close.

She was no longer in the storeroom. She was in a cold, dark desert somewhere, pale and lifeless. As if the land were one huge bone, torn into strange shapes by the wind. But she could feel no wind. She was encased in something. The bubble sat upon her shoulders, and a thick, warm suit was nested around her body. There were mountains in the distance, and between their jagged peaks she could see the begin-

ning of a great open space, a pit or depression in the ground. There were places like that out in the desert, people said. Out in the places where you should never go; where if you went too far, you'd get sick and die.

Shauna felt herself moving, and wasn't sure whether it was her, or Grandma. She bounded forward, with giant steps, and sprang into the air.

She took the bubble from her head. As it came away, she heard its voice again, sighing, perhaps with relief.

The next day, when her chores were done, Shauna sat on the veranda and played with a desert frog that had hopped up from the sand.

She decided never to look into the bubble again. It had been too strange, incomprehensible. She couldn't understand where Grandma had been. Was the desert like that, in the old days? It was unlike anywhere she had heard of before. She would have asked about it, but it was better not to ask too many questions. But she wondered, to herself, why she wasn't allowed to work out in the desert with her brothers, or take a turn standing guard in the night; why she couldn't ride a horse, and must always keep her face covered in Church.

She saw her father riding in from the desert, and ran inside to put milk on the stove. As she went, she saw Grandma glance up, and give her a tiny nod of approval.

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**Alexander Glass's** last story in these pages – his fifth to be published by us – was "The Mirror Repair'd" (issue 139). In his 20s, he lives in London and works as a freelance proofreader.

## interzone

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# Mars

*Stephen Baxter*

(Author's note: I was sent the enclosed document anonymously. The document itself, a photocopy, is government-speak, bland to the point of unreadability. But the notes scribbled in the margins are intriguing.)

*Title page:*

United States General Accounting Office  
GAO report to the Honorable William X. Lambie,  
House of Representatives  
June 1998  
GOVERNMENT RECORDS  
Results of a Search for Records Concerning  
the 1983 Explosion near Cross Fork, Nevada  
SUMMARY ONLY  
GAO/NSRAF-96-244

*Cover note:*

From: United States General Accounting Office, Washington, DC 20548. National Security and International Affairs Division. June 24, 1998.

To: The Honorable William X Lambie, House of Representatives.

Dear Mr. Lambie:

After fifteen years, speculation continues on the truth of the large explosion which is alleged to have taken place at a covert US military research facility in Nevada.

Some observers speculate that the explosion was the destruction of a conventional rocket; others that it was caused by the crash of an aircraft, perhaps of an extraterrestrial nature; others that agencies of the government have been engaged in a misinformation campaign to conceal some deeper truth, such as a *successful* launch of some space vehicle; others that this was the demolition of a covert military facility.

In its 1984 official report and since, the Air Force has denied the reality of the explosion.

Concerned that the Department of Defense may not have provided you with all available information on the incident, you asked us to determine any government records concerning the incident. We examined a wide range of classified and unclassified documents dating from 1965 through the 1980s. The full scope and methodology of our work are detailed in the full report...

Sir:

I read your counterfactual "novel." About NASA going on to Mars in the 1980s, instead of shutting everything down after Apollo? What a crock.

Counterfactuality does not serve the needs of the *truth*. But now, at last, the truth is starting to come out.

And the truth is, *people have been to Mars*.

They are walking around among us right now. And nobody knows about it.

Of course much of the data returned by the old Mars probes has always been kept from the public. These include:

- 1) Grainy photographs of what could be structures on the surface taken by the space probe Mariner 4 in 1964.

- 2) Mysterious surface glimpses through the global dust storm encountered on the planet by Mariner 9 in 1971.
- 3) The strange readings from the Viking landers of 1976, which found a supposedly sterile Martian surface.

And of course the Mars Observer of 1992 was deliberately destroyed. (The jury is out on the Russian Mars 96. Maybe that really was a screw-up.)

Only a handful of people know that the US General Accounting Office – that’s Congress’s investigative arm – recently published *this*, the results of a search for records concerning the Cross Fork, Nevada incident, generally thought to be at the centre of the Mars cover-up. *Search* meaning forced through by white-hat Congressman Bill Lambie, who’s as sick of cover-ups as anyone. *Published* meaning hurried out and buried. I owe my copy to [illegible].

Here’s how I started this.

I got an e-mail from a Janet [illegible] of Albuquerque. She said she had met a hooker from Reno in the 1970s. This lady had worked at a cathouse close to Cross Fork, Nevada. And she told Janet there had been an awful lot of ex-NASA engineers in town at that time.

And one night two NASA guys talked too much.

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL, WASHINGTON DC 20506.

APRIL 18, 1997.

MEMORANDUM FOR MR JOHN E PROCTOR, DIRECTOR-IN-CHARGE, NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUES, GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE.

SUBJECT: Request for Records.

I am responding to your April 2, 1997 request for information or NSC records related to the supposed explosion near Cross Fork, Nevada in October 1983.

The NSC has no records or information related to the incident.

For information about any government records that may document the explosion in Nevada, we suggest you contact the National Archives, Textual Reference Division, 8601 Adelphi Rd, College Park, Maryland 20740.

– Albert D Steele, Executive Secretary

There were four categories of key staff involved in the Mars cover-up:

- 1) top level management, including CIA, FBI and DIA operatives
- 2) interface personnel
- 3) technical personnel
- 3) the astronauts.

Only recruiting the astronauts would have posed any challenge. These were, after all, brave and dedicated men.

Secrecy would not have been a major problem, even for such a gigantic enterprise. There were precedents. More than three hundred thousand people were directly involved in the building of an atomic bomb in 1942-5, and no significant information reached the public.

And besides America had been sliding towards a

police state for years (wire-taps, surveillance of civilians) and it was a simple matter to apply these cloak-and-dagger methods and precedents to the Mars program.

(I was e-mailed with the news that someone had called into a talk show in Phoenix, Arizona, and claimed to be the man who had run the security operation for NASA during that period. He claimed that four astronauts died in missions that were squelched by NASA. And he said he had the truth about Apollo 13. Never heard from again. Probably a flake.)

The entire Mars program was run out of Southern Nevada, at a (so-called) atomic test station called the Nevada Test Site: a thousand square miles of Nevada desert.

Why there?

It is an area of hills, mountain peaks, desert valleys draining into dry lake beds. The lunar-like terrain is a warren of dark tunnels and secret facilities. You’d spot a car miles away from its dust cloud; anybody walking would be the only moving object in the landscape. And who would go there? Even by 1970 it had a reputation as a forbidden region, soaked in radioactivity.

The most likely sites of the USAF Mars facility are those least used by the AEC, notably Yucca Flat and Camp Desert Rock, aka Area 22.

Here’s another good reason: Vegas – just sixty miles to the south-east.

Those astronauts weren’t children, and they weren’t shrinking violets. The clerks and secretaries for the Mars control centre were babes recruited from Las Vegas casinos, which added to the general appeal of the place.

Executive Office of the President, Office of Science and Technology Policy, Washington DC 20500. April 20, 1997.

Mr John E Proctor, Director-in-Charge, National Security Issues, General Accounting Office.

Dear Mr Proctor:

In response to your recent query of April 2, 1997.

The Office of Science and Technology Policy reviewed its records concerning the “Nevada Incident.” OSTP has no direct knowledge of what occurred at Nevada and no records, except for the information I received from the Air Force. I look forward to receiving the GAO report.

Sincerely, Joseph V Ververk, Director

At Cross Fork, Nevada, I found that hooker.

And through her I found a guy called Tad Jones.

Tad Jones claimed to have been a minor worker, in the early 1970s, on a covert government nuclear rocket program. This program continued after the shut-down of the public-domain NERVA program, following Nixon’s (supposed) decision not to go to Mars.

Jones, and other workers, were bribed and threatened to keep them quiet about their work on the program. Jones lost his job in 1972, I gather for personal reasons. Now, more than two decades later, radiation injuries were killing him.

The thing of it is, Tad Jones told me he once met a man who told *him* he had been to Mars.

He was called Elliott Becker, and at the time he was

an Air Force colonel, and he made the mistake of getting too drunk one night.

Under false pretences, which I won't go into here, I got to meet Elliott Becker himself. He is now a senior Air Force officer. He is aged around 60, and he suffers from premature-aging symptoms: atrophied muscles, osteoporosis.

He threw me out fast. But not so fast I didn't manage to notice some oddities. For instance at one point Becker let go of a glass in mid-air and looked startled when it fell.

This sort of thing happened to the Skylab astronauts and Mir cosmonauts, conditioned to long periods in zero G. Furthermore his illnesses are consistent with the proposal that Becker endured a long-duration spaceflight in the early 1980s.

But he was not on any spaceflight made public.

So where the hell did he go?

I only met Tad Jones the once.

I wasn't so surprised. Ageing, poor, stricken by pain, Jones was becoming less discreet. I don't know how he died. His old radiation injuries must have baffled the coroners.

Of course he could have been lying through his teeth about the whole thing. But if so, where did he get his injuries?

US Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation,  
Washington DC 20535. April 22, 1997.

Mr John E Proctor, Director-in-Charge, National Security Issues,  
General Accounting Office.

Dear Mr Proctor:

This is in response to a letter dated April 2, 1997, from Simon J Holusha, Director, Administration of Justice Issues, General Accounting Office, to Kathryn G Keyworth, Inspector in Charge, Office of Public and Congressional Affairs, FBI, regarding government records concerning the large-scale explosion near Cross Fork, Nevada in October 1983 (Code 91183).

A search of FBI indices has determined that all FBI data concerning the incident has been processed under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and is available for review in our FOIA Reading Room. If your staff wishes to review the material, please call Margaret Feeley, a member of my staff, at least 48 hours in advance of the desired appointment.

Sincerely yours,

Eric G Dower, Supervisory Special Agent,  
Office of Public and Congressional affairs

The truth about Mars, at least, is now obvious.

The space probes did not observe any evidence of an inhabited Mars because it was deliberately concealed. The Mariner 9 dust storm was no coincidence! – it was thrown up to conceal hasty efforts *by the planet's inhabitants* to fake a moonlike landscape. And the surface was sterilized by neutron bombs before the Vikings could land, and the Mars Observer was shot out of the sky...

We didn't go back to Mars for twenty years. And by

the time we got there, with Pathfinder and the rest, there was nothing to see. Of course not. The Martians had completed their mock-up.

And nobody told us about all this. We worship secrecy in this country.

Get this: last year the US government produced 6,300,000 "classified" documents. The least restricted bear the stamp FOUO, "For Official Use Only." The next category – the first technically classified – are "Confidential." After that comes "Secret," and some of them are "NATO Secret," meaning they can be shared with NATO nations. Then comes "Top Secret" and "NATO Top Secret."

Above "Top Secret" there is "SCI" – "Sensitive Compartmented Information," open to still fewer individuals. And there is some information that you can only see if you are on a BIGOT list – if you have your own specific code word.

And then there are qualifies like "NOFORN" – no foreigners to see – and "NOCONTRACT" – no contractors, "WNINTEL" – "Warning Notice – Intelligence Sources or Methods Involved," "ORCON" – "Originator Controls Further Dissemination."

What's the cost of all this secrecy? When does secrecy increase military strength, and when does it weaken security?

We should be told.

... Or is that classified too??

The space probe evidence, naturally, was covered up. I should be used by now to our natural disposition for secrecy. But over an issue as immense as this, it utterly dismays me.

That's why I fight on.

(Teletype uncovered during review of FOIA material:)

FBI DALLAS 10-20-1983 4-28 PM

DIRECTOR AND SAC, CINCINNATI URGENT

NEVADA EXPLOSION, INFORMATION CONCERNING

(blanked)

TELEPHONICALLY ADVISED THIS OFFICE THAT (blanked) SATELLITE OBSERVED DEBRIS AND DESTRUCTION AT (blanked) TELEPHONIC CONVERSATION BETWEEN THIS OFFICE AND (blanked) FAILED TO BEAR OUT BELIEF PHOTOGRAPHS AND NEGATIVES BEING TRANSPORTED TO THIS OFFICE BY SPECIAL PLANE FOR EXAMINATION PROVIDED BY THIS OFFICE BECAUSE OF NATIONAL INTEREST IN THE CASE AND FACT THAT NATIONAL BROADCASTING COMPANY ASSOCIATED PRESS AND OTHERS ATTEMPTING TO BREAK STORY OF EXPLOSION AND/OR AIRCRAFT CRASH TODAY NO FURTHER INVESTIGATION BEING CONDUCTED  
END.

Here's the story, as best I can reconstruct it.

In 1971 – armed with space probe information about a secretive, advanced and possibly hostile civilization on Mars – President Nixon ordered preparations to begin for covert missions to Mars, manned and otherwise. These were to include the possibility of launching a pre-emptive nuclear attack against the planet. The project was under the command of the USAF, and would use Apollo moon-

rocket technology with nuclear rocket stages.

(And *that*, sir author, is the truth about Nixon's decision on going to Mars after Apollo. He didn't decide we wouldn't go. He decided we would – but the program would be run by the USAF, not NASA, and it would be run in secret. Even the publicly declared Apollo follow-on program, the Space Shuttle, had a military flavour and had a role in the defense of Earth against the Martians, which I've yet to determine.)

Elliott Becker trained as an astronaut in the 1960s. In 1971 his death was faked in a T-38 airplane accident, and he was assigned to the secret man-to-Mars program.

But Nixon fell, and the project was abandoned, the Nevada launch complex and the space hardware mothballed. Elliott was moved into senior Air Force positions, with a central responsibility for maintaining the integrity of a Mars program cover-up.

In 1981, things changed.

By now the additional Viking data was in hand. President Reagan ordered the mounting of a secret manned flyby scouting mission to Mars, under the command of the USAF, using what was left of the 1970s-era Saturn technology. This limited-objectives mission was achievable relatively easily. Meanwhile Reagan revived preparations for a nuclear attack on Mars.

The flyby mission was launched in 1982 from the secret Nevada base. It carried two men, and it would pass by Mars on the planet's night side.

The funding was covered as an SDI project. But when SDI funding came under scrutiny, and Reagan's attention moved on to other issues, the project was again abandoned. I guess the logic was that the Martians didn't after all pose an immediate threat. This time the Nevada launch complex was destroyed.

And that's the truth behind the 1983 explosion out in the desert.

... But Elliott Becker got to fly his mission.

Inspector General, Department of Defense, 400 Army Navy Drive, Arlington, Virginia 22202-2684. April 29, 1997.

Mr John E Proctor, Director-in-Charge, National Security Issues, General Accounting Office.

Dear Mr Proctor:

The Department of the Air Force July 1984 report is the DoD response to questions posed in your April 2 letter related to GAO C 91165. If you have any questions, please contact my action officer, Janet Fromkin, at 703-604-7846. If she is not available please contact Ms Frances Douhet at 703-604-7543.

Sincerely

Richard S Dupuy, Deputy Assistant Inspector General  
for GAO Report Analysis.

Tad Jones told me that in 1981 he heard a rumour that the program he had worked was being revived. But nobody was hiring in Cross Fork.

Tad Jones was kind of a bitter man. So he got himself an off-road vehicle and went hunting.

The nuclear rocket site is on no map. Jones had to break through wire fences and skirt mine fields (he told me). Then he found himself in an area of high radioactivity (he'd taken along counters).

He approached the centre of the site.

And there he found the white needle-shape of a nuclear-tipped Saturn V rocket, assembled in secret, standing on a rusting gantry out there in the desert. Hell of a thing. He showed me a photograph.

Jones said that after the demolition the site was seeded with radioactive waste. He said it would be impossible to return to the now-lethal site, and the evidence is lost.

But the program lasted long enough to send Elliott Becker to Mars.

He and his crewmate used Apollo-class spacecraft, enduring the year-long journey in an adapted Skylab habitation module.

Think of it. Becker must have watched Earth and Moon recede like twin stars, every moment travelling further than any human before him. I wonder what he imagined he would find at journey's end.

Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, DC 20505.

May 22 1997.

Mr John E Proctor, Director-in-Charge, National Security Issues, General Accounting Office.

Dear Mr Proctor:

In a letter dated 15 April 1997, this Agency advised you that it would conduct a comprehensive record search to aid in the completion of your investigation of an explosion in Nevada, October 1983. In accordance with your request we have searched all of our databases. The search did not yield any documents related to either of these terms other than the report returned by our field worker Frederic K Durant in 1983, which remains classified. Therefore this Agency has no information relevant to your investigation.

Sincerely, Nora Franck, Executive Director.

It goes to prove there is hope. Even the most gigantic fraud and cover-up, no matter what the investment of time and money, is going to flake at the edges after a couple of decades.

Look, you can verify most of this stuff from the public records for yourself, as I'm trying to do. Right? And I'd welcome it if you did and let me know. I mean, it was *our* hundred billion dollars.

I have an instinct to blow a hole through every veil of secrecy I come across. That keeps me busy. It's a point of principle. But aside from the principle, I just want to know. I mean, here we have two guys who went all the way to Mars, for God's sake, and they've never been allowed to tell their stories.

I'll go to my grave wondering what Elliot Becker saw. Just cold, lonely emptiness? Or perhaps glimpses of structures, lights in the ochre deserts on the dark side of Mars?

*We grope for truth, and make our progress slow.*  
William Davenant, 1606-1668

(Author's note: I guess it's fairly obvious why I was the target of this particular hoax. And my correspondent is right about our culture's excessive fondness for secrecy, as this stonewalling document itself demonstrates; as long as secrecy remains, rumours about what is being hidden are going to flourish.

(But like all good hoaxes, this one is rooted in enough fact to make it at least remotely plausible – for there *are* a few oddities in the story of human involvement with Mars.

(Before the first space probes, Mars was thought to be Earth-like. Many expert telescope observers were convinced they had seen networks of canals, swathes of vegetation. The Mariner 4 flyby probe of 1964, however, glimpsed a Moon-like world with a thin atmosphere, and craters where the Earth-bound observers thought they saw canals. In 1971 the Mariner 9 orbiter really did find a global dust storm obscuring the surface. And later, the Viking landers found a surface not just lifeless but apparently sterilized, perhaps by solar radiation. The US Mars Observer did fail as it reached Mars.

(And there were proposals, mooted in the 1960s, for manned flybys of Mars, an interim program to follow Apollo. The flyby *would* have passed the planet's dark side...)

United States General Accounting Office.

Summary to GAO report GAO/NSRA-96-244 addressed to the Hon. W.X. Lambie.

Cover note (concluded):

...Our search of government records was complicated by the fact that some records we wanted to review were missing and there was not always an explanation. Further, the records management regulations for the retention and disposition of records were unclear or changing during the period we reviewed.

We conducted our review from March 1997 to May 1998 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please call me on (202) 512-7858.

Sincerely yours,

John E Proctor, Director-In-Charge,  
National Security Issues.

...ends

**Stephen Baxter's** novel *Voyage*, to which the above new story is a kind of pendant, has been dramatized for BBC Radio 4 (Mondays at 11 pm, for five weeks from 12th April 1999).

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I suspect cyberpunk writers of competing informally to see who can design the most sordid world. Approaches vary, and you can trace the tradition back through *The Space Merchants* and *Metropolis* to Wells's "A Story of the Days to Come," but K.W. Jeter's *Noir* (Millennium, £6.99) must be a strong contender, not least because of the evident exuberance he has brought to its ornamentation. Here's a mid-21st century street scene:

Past the unlit hallways and the faint smells of dog-bottle alcohol and sweating bedsheets that seeped out from under the doors, and out into the night's alleys and cracked sidewalks, with their pools of streetlamp glow that didn't reach from one to the other, that left patches of darkness stitched with buzzing neon above the steps of basement gin mills that you descended like marching into one's grave.

No, you haven't missed the main verb, and yes, it does read like a parody of 1940s tough-'tec. There's a reason for the latter: McNihil (= McNeill?), the tough 'tec (well, legalized serial killer, actually) taking in the scene has had some very expensive hardware wired into his brain just so that he'll perceive the world in this way. Tough as he is, he needs to shield himself against harsh reality.

The female lead, November, has a hobby. She offers no-strings sex (upright amid the litter of people shooting-up) to pick-ups on trains – without mentioning that those who attempt to further the relationship will be wasted pronto. When the two meet (she just having saved his life), McNihil first checks the condition of his latest trophy (some essential bits of his latest victim), then beats her up for following him around. These two are the good guys; the bad guys are much, much worse.

For a whole lot of reasons relating to physics, biology, psychology and especially economics it's impossible to take this book seriously for a moment, but its fascination is undeniable. I read on, entranced by Jeter's sure-footed deployment of *noir* symbolism, while wondering what new and utterly gratuitous depth of cruelty and depravity he proposed to plumb next. It's all good, dirty fun for the strong of stomach, though Jeter's ear is nothing like as fine as his eye. Expressions like "it'd", "should've" etc., which belong exclusively to the dialogue of low characters and people under stress, have no place in the narrative, and his one running joke – that the word "connect" should have assumed all the literal and metaphorical meanings of "fuck" – makes no linguistic sense. Perhaps he's gunning for E.M. Forster's notorious epi-

## Colonizing Storylines

Chris Gilmore

graph, but jokes of that sort need to be credible to work.

So don't have nightmares, and above all, take none of it to heart.

What goes around, comes around; fantasy, having captured so much of the traditional sf readership, is colonizing its storylines as well. Holly Lisle's *Diplomacy of Wolves* (Millennium, £16.99) is a 1990s re-write of John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*. It's set in a post-debacle world, pocked with 16 circular craters

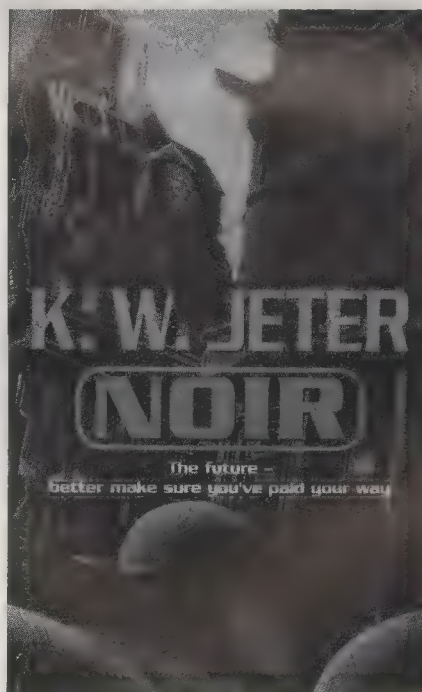


REVIEWED

to match the largest on the Moon, the legacy of a magical [nuclear] war somewhat over a thousand years past. There are also many races of Scarred [mutants] who are persecuted by regular humans, none more so than the Karnee, who are were-creatures with modest telepathic powers. No less persecuted (in theory) are those who practise magic, no one wanting a recurrence of the war. Polity lies in the hands of five great Families, who own everything of consequence, mint the gold coinage and feud viciously among themselves, not scrupling to use magic when it suits them.

Predictably, the central character, Kait, is a Karnee. She is also a junior diplomat in the service of her Family, but once she finds herself stranded in the wrong place after an unusually destructive double cross, she has no recourse but to throw in her lot with the Falcons, a secret order which claims to use exclusively benign magic. Sub-plots involve Hasmal, a junior Falcon whose destiny is linked to Kait's by prophecy; Danya, her cousin, who is raped, impregnated and converted into a monstrous shape by the black magic of the rival Sabir Family; and Ry, a male Karnee and magician in the service of the Sabirs. As several parties enjoy the patronage of (generally mendacious) supernatural beings over and above what they can conjure, there's plenty of scope for violence, intrigue and hairsbreadth escapes, plus barbarous execution of those who get caught, but this is strictly lightweight, non-cerebral entertainment.

As such, I can only commend it to

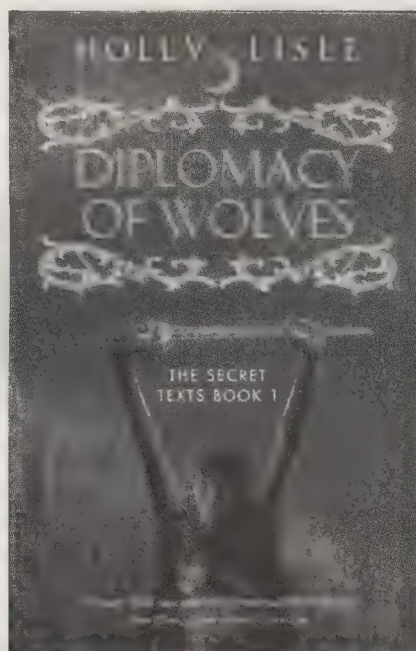


the enthusiast; Lisle has all the things you can't do without, but none of the things you have to have some of. Her writing isn't at all bad, but it's not especially good; her characters make sense in their context, but they're thin; her plotting is workmanlike, but without artistry; her world isn't straight off the shelf, but it's derivative; her cliff-hanger ending is good, but you have to read the rest of the book first. What's the superlative of run-of-the-mill? It's not a bad book, but last month I praised Robin Hobb, and three months ago Guy Gavriel Kay and Patricia McKillip, all of whom write seriously well. Just how many do you need?

Most novels belong to a literary tradition, which they sustain more or less well or badly, but you sometimes meet one which derives more obviously from film, TV or, in the case of Gerry O'Brien's *Cleaning Up* (Colin Smythe, £5.99), both.

The basic framework is an Ealing caper-comedy, with variously dishonest and dim-witted parties in pursuit of a very large diamond of doubtful ownership. This being low comedy, characters issue numerous threats of murder or maiming, but one knows from the outset that they'll all end in a pratfall or a bonk on the head at worst, as they stumble about the labyrinthine wards of a run-down hospital and other unattractive parts of the East End (including a sewage farm), bumping into lumpy objects, the police and each other. If the director's on form and you're in the right mood, slapstick of this kind can work extremely well, but in cold print I found it rather heavy going. The trouble is, so many of the obvious stars are no longer available – Lon Chaney, Bernard Bresslaw, Mike & Bernie, Frankie Howerd, the young Barbara Windsor, the middle-aged Joan Simms – so I had trouble casting it. Those more *au fait* with current cinema may do better.

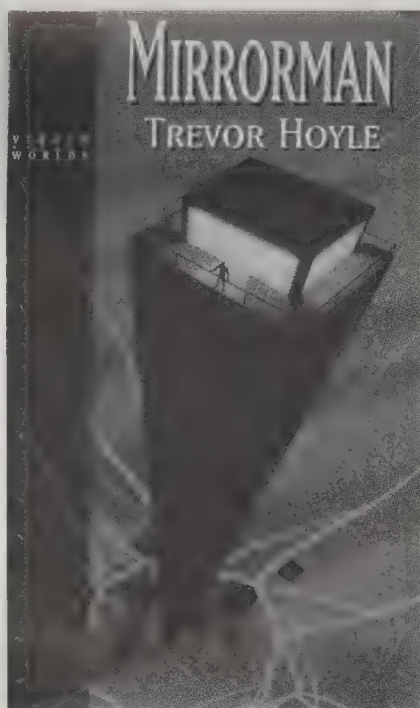
The other principal element derives from the passages of animation used to embellish *The Young Ones*, as a fair amount of the action is observed from the viewpoints of sundry inanimate objects, including the diamond itself, several cars and the contents of a young lady's vanity case (these last are deeply unhappy with their lot, she having recently decided to go for the natural look). Not all the jokes are as good as this one by any means, and as is so often the case, the weak ones tend to detract from the overall effect. But those who like on-page slapstick will like it a lot, and as even I must allow, it's an original idea – albeit in a very old-fashioned way. Even the diction is early post-war,



with everyone using "beggar" as a general term of abuse where "bugger" is clearly meant. Ah me! The Days of Innocence, long fled!

Literature it really isn't; but someone ought to buy the film rights and shoot it in black-and-white, with Technicolor for the animation. Make a good job, and we may yet see a retro classic.

A type of story to which sf is particularly well suited, and which Philip K. Dick made especially his own, is the one where the viewpoint character (and by association the reader) finds himself in a situation which appears to violate causality,



common sense or both. Dick tended to use either a single protagonist (*Time Out of Joint*) or a series (*Maze of Death*, *Eye in the Sky*); in *Mirrorman* (Virgin Worlds, £6.99), Trevor Hoyle is a bit more ambitious, with several viewpoints, shuttling between at least two worlds.

One character, Jeff Cawdor, is central to both. In our own world he's a civil engineer who finds reality is cracking up around him: his wife and daughter have become enamoured of an airhead TV programme controlled by religious maniacs; his secretary accuses him of a sexual assault which he never committed, though he had fantasized about it; an enigmatic Indian doctor who has offered him a warning goes on to offer him therapy, but denies ever having met him before; his waking hours are plagued by horrifying visions, while by night he dreams that he, his (different) family and the doctor are passengers on an immigrant ship, seeking a new life in the New World of 1774 – and are persecuted by the same religious maniacs, who accuse him of a sexual assault he has not committed.

But of course, they aren't dreams – we see the experiences of his 18th-century wife and child from their own viewpoints, so this is a tale of conflicting realities. As such it belongs to fantasy rather than sf, and that's its principal weakness; the rules of fantasy are less rigorous, which slackens the constraints governing the central puzzle, which consequently loses interest. Hoyle's writing is similarly lacking in discipline, with far too much space devoted to essentially futile interviews and lucubrations which do very little to develop the characters and nothing to advance the plot. Moreover, most of the sex scenes, of which there are plenty, are cheap exploitation writing – arousing distaste but no frisson.

Even so, the central puzzle is diverting. The maniacs worship a Redeemer and Saviour whom they know perfectly well to be a common, sordid, not very bright murderer obviously modelled on the late Gary Gilmore. There's no lack of worthier Gilmores, so why worship that one? That question, plus a professional interest in whether Hoyle would drop some or all of the balls he had in the air, sustained my interest through the frequent longueurs and occasional inurbanity of the early chapters. The quality picked up towards the climax, where most of the loose ends were tied off, but I could have done with more rigour. For instance, on the ship there are grown men christened Franklin and Jefferson, yet in 1774, both Franklin and Jefferson were still alive and had certainly not achieved that sort of prominence.

I waited in vain for any hint of an answer to that one.

Nor was the central puzzle ever convincingly resolved; neither the powers possessed by the maniacs and the Indian doctor, nor the maniacs' obses-

sion with ill-treating Cawdor was ever explained, so that I was inevitably put in mind of writers who had attacked the same sort of idea more effectively: L. Ron Hubbard (*Typewriter in the Sky*), Roger Zelazny (*Eye of Cat*) and

Iain Banks (*The Bridge*). On balance I'd rather re-read all of those (which would have taken me little longer, given this book's padding); so, perhaps, would you.

Chris Gilmore

New fiction keeps rolling off the *Star Trek* assembly line and onto the bookshelves. Generally, it's paperback fiction, but there's also the occasional prestige hardback such as *Triangle: Imzadi II* (that's Roman numerals 2 in the Imzadi sequence, not number eleven) by Peter David (Pocket, £9.99). I was expecting good things from this book, first because David is the best of the Trekfiction writers, with a canny ability to weave new tales around the established characters and canon and, secondly, because *Imzadi*, the immediate prequel to this book, is probably the single best Trek novel, blending the time-gate from the City at the Edge of Forever with the Riker/Troi on-off romance.

In this latest book, Deanna Troi and Will Riker (two of them, actually) are back at the centre of the action, and with them is everyone's favourite Klingon, Worf, making up the third corner of a love-triangle. As the *Next Generation* television series trekked to its seventh-season conclusion, the writers began teasing us with the Worf/Troi romance they had sternly resisted during seasons five and six and who knows what might have happened to this budding relationship if the *Enterprise* hadn't been totalled after hitting a parked planet in the movie *Generations* and Worf drafted to scare off the Klingons and shore up the ratings over at *Deep Space 9* (where he was to meet, bed and marry the gorgeous Jadzia Dax).

David sets his tale in the window of *TNG* opportunity between the end of *Generations* and the next feature film, *First Contact*, with the *Enterprise-D* down and its replacement, the *Enterprise-E*, yet to be commissioned and the crew very much at loose ends. Opening the action (well, more or less) at the wreck of the *Enterprise-D*, Worf and Deanna's cosy pairing is already showing signs of strain, and Riker suddenly (and not very credibly) begins, very late in the day, to wish he hadn't given his blessing to Worf's wooing of Troi – and decides to do something about it. Troi is torn, Worf is pissed off, and jealousy is beamed aboard the otherwise abnormally well-adjusted Trek universe. Add to the mix a duplicate Riker, a transporter double we last saw a captive of the Cardassians, who is also enamoured of Counsellor Troi; Sela, a blonde-tressed Romulan badie who looks remarkably like the

late Tasha Yar but is actually her daughter; and Lwaxwana Troi, Deanna's mum – and you have the ingredients for a really good tale.

Unfortunately though, this particular stew needs a better recipe and a lot more simmering. Unlike with the original *Imzadi*, there's no really compelling plot thread to pull these bitty elements together. Also, and especially given the established Trek background, the Worf/Riker jealousy angle is not just unwelcome but also improbable, even sandwiched as it is between *Enterprises*. All in all, this is a real disappointment.

But while *The Next Generation* transferred to cinemas, *Deep Space 9* (surely influenced by *Babylon 5*'s much-lauded five-year story arc) was turning out to be simply the best Trek ever – and building towards a climactic war between the Federation and the Dominion, with the station itself taken over by a Cardassian/Dominion task force under loveable Cardassian badhat Gul Dukat at the end of season five. The first six episodes of season six would chronicle the Federation fightback and eventual retaking of the station. Naturally, there was room here for novelizations – enter *The Dominion War, Books Two and Four*, by Diane Carey (Pocket, £4.99 each) which are competent retreads of the

excellent episodes, although I'm frankly unsure as to why anyone would want to read them as they only deliver a lacklustre version of the special-effects-laden episodes you can buy on video.

Then somebody came up with a very smart marketing idea: hey, while the Trek universe is going to war and the *Enterprise-E* is between films, let's get someone to pad out Picard and the gang's contribution to the war effort. Now this is an excellent idea, and perhaps if Peter David had taken on the job, he might have come up with something worth reading. Instead it went to John Vornholt and we get two books, *The Dominion War, Books One and Three* (Pocket, £4.99 each) with a strong central idea – the Dominion are building an artificial wormhole and must be stopped at all costs – and an episodic idiot-plot in which Picard lurches from one sticky situation to another more like an innocent abroad than the resourceful Starfleet officer he's supposed to be, Data goes off by himself, and acting captain Riker has problems getting the *Enterprise* repaired and back into action. We do get reintroduced to Ensign Ro, as well as Sam Lavelle and Taurik from the episode "Lower Decks," but they're wasted, used along with the regular *TNG* characters in this uninspired as-contracted-for stew to pad out a one-book idea into two while the prose joins up the dotted line of the plot gracelessly. Sadly, because surely the story of the *Enterprise*'s part in the Dominion War really could have been an excellent story, these two books are best avoided.

After the disappointment of the Vornholt books, it's good to be able to recommend books five and six respectively of the six-part *Captain's Table* sequence. First, though, the Captain's Table concept: there's a special bar where captains (and only captains) can sometimes find themselves – a very special place that exists independently of normal space-time where the price of the drinks is a tale. Books 1 to 4 are tales from Captains Kirk, Picard, Sisko and Janeway, while the two reviewed here, *Once Burned* by Peter David (Pocket, £4.99) and *Where Sea Meets Sky* by Jerry Olton (Pocket, £4.99) are from Captains Mackenzie Calhoun and Christopher Pike.

Yes, that's right: Calhoun and Pike.

## Trekfiction

Neil Jones



Of course you know who Kirk and the others are – their place in the Trek pantheon is established – but who are these other two guys?

Long-time Trekkers will remember Christopher Pike as played by Jeffrey Hunter, the *Enterprise's* captain in the first pilot, "The Cage," which was later incorporated into the two-part episode, "The Menagerie." So Pike has a claim of sorts for his own Trek novel. Calhoun, by contrast is a new-minted captain, the original creation of Peter David, who has never been in front of a camera but features in a print mini-series called *New Frontier*.

In *Once Burned*, Calhoun tells a story from early in his Starfleet career, when he served as first officer aboard the USS Grissom. Calhoun is an alien (which in Trek terms means he's a vaguely foreign humanoid) from the world of Xenex (a name that's unfortunately reminiscent of Kleenex). He's a tough character who has freed his planet from an imperialist race called the Danteri. Afterwards, joining Starfleet, he blends in by taking the name of his home city – Calhoun, would you believe? – as his surname, and then smoothing out his given name M'k'n'z'y into Mackenzie. –Yes, it's utterly ludicrous and bound

to come close to bouncing you right out of the book, but if you bear with this silliness you'll find the book readable enough. But most Trek-writers, David firmly included, seem fairly dreadful at creating new alien races that fit with the established Trek background – either they're too extravagantly alien and would never appear on camera due to budget limits in the special-effects department, or they're just one more set of dull cardboard humanoids with odd names (although usually a step up from M'k'n'z'y.)

Calhoun signs on as Captain Norman Kenyon's first officer (and yes, I did find the idea of a great starfleet captain called Norman a little hard to buy). All is going well until Kenyon loses his marbles and Calhoun, sensibly of course, is driven to mutiny. After an overly introspective start, the story holds your interest well and turns out to be a very agreeable way of passing the time, mainly thanks to David's smooth writing.

Oh, with the exception of the seamless blend at the end to the opening of the Captain Pike tale. This marketing gimmick is a feature of the entire series – the Pike book segues into almost 20 pages of Book 1 in the

series, Kirk's tale. I'd rather have done without this material altogether but if it has to be at the back of the book surely the conclusion could be properly signalled?

The Oltion novel turns out to be the best read of all. Partly it's that he does a very good job of filling out the sketchy character of Christopher Pike, and partly that he makes the frequent intervals in the bar genuinely interesting with a female Klingon and a mystery man from the past who turns out to be a captain we know very well. Mostly though it's that he introduces us to some intriguing giant space-going lifeforms in the main story – apparently the idea for them came from an sf convention panel – and makes the investigation of the Titans and eventual discovery of what they are and where they come from a page-turner, with an old-fashioned almost nostalgic feel to it that worked very well for me.

A few issues ago in *Interzone* 138, Kristine Kathryn Rusch put up a spirited defence of media tie-in fiction as a starting place for kids to get into reading sf. Oltion's book is surely a perfect example of what she had in mind.

Neil Jones.

Although I've never really been able to appreciate the finer points of baseball – particularly the scoring – I have always accepted the strangely mythic quality that surrounds America's national game. To me, baseball is to games what, to many people, a church is to buildings – and, interestingly, it seems that way to a lot of writers.

Even way back in the early 1960s, with the *Strange Sports Stories* sequence in the old DC "try-out" comicbook *The Brave and the Bold* – a half-dozen issues that had (more or less) aliens threatening to take over Earth... using various games to achieve their aims – it was always the baseball stories that stood out from the rest... stood out not simply because of story or art (even though they were invariably drawn by the great Carmine Infantino) but because there was an undeniable *something* seemingly inherent in the game that transcended the concept of a bunch of men hitting a ball.

Then, in the 1970s, the same thing happened – only more graphically horror-related – when Infantino moonlighted on Jim Warren's black & white magazine line and they produced a couple of off-beat sports issues of *Creepy* using the same formula. And all this on top of *Mad's* parody of Ernest Lawrence Thayer's immortal poem "Casey at the Bat" (from *Mad* 6, Aug./Sep. 1953) and

## Batter Up!

Peter Crowther

Rod Serling's similarly light-hearted *Twilight Zone* treatment, "The Mighty Casey" (1960).

Since then we've had endless crime and mystery novels set in and around the game – most notably Robert B. Parker's extremely literate private eye Spenser in *Mortal Stakes* and the short story "Spenser's A Fan, Too," Robert Irvine's Moroni Traveler (*Gone to Glory*), Crabbe Evers's *Duffy House* series, Troy Soos's Mickey Rawlings novels; and Paul Benjamin's *Squeeze Play*. But we've also had Roger Kahn's

*The Boys of Summer* and, in the shape of Oscar Madison from Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*, an Everyman sportswriter who could conceivably have been the seminal influence behind Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe (*The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, two novels which eloquently detail the human condition).

And in the more allegorical scheme of things we've had a "mystical" baseball field (W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* – one of many of Kinsella's baseball stories – which was made into the movie *Field of Dreams*); a "mystical" team (Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel*); a "mystical" player (Michael Bishop's *Brittle Innings*); a "mystical" bat (Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*); and, most recently, a "mystical" ball (Don De Lillo's epic *Underworld*... in which the search for the actual baseball from Bobby Thomson's home run – the one that clinched the 1953 pennant for the New York Giants – sits Grail-like at the centre of a sprawling 800-page novel, managing in the process to make some sense of the second half of the 20th Century).

Well, now we've got one more.

To be fair, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* (Hodder & Stoughton, £12.99) – Stephen King's surprise novel of 1999 – is as much Jack London-meets-Henry David Thoreau (*The Call of the Wild* and *Walden* respectively) as it is baseball... with maybe

a little bit of Theodore Sturgeon's "It" and the dark underside of Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* thrown in for good measure: so there's no call for anyone who either doesn't understand the game (or who simply is not interested) to be put off.

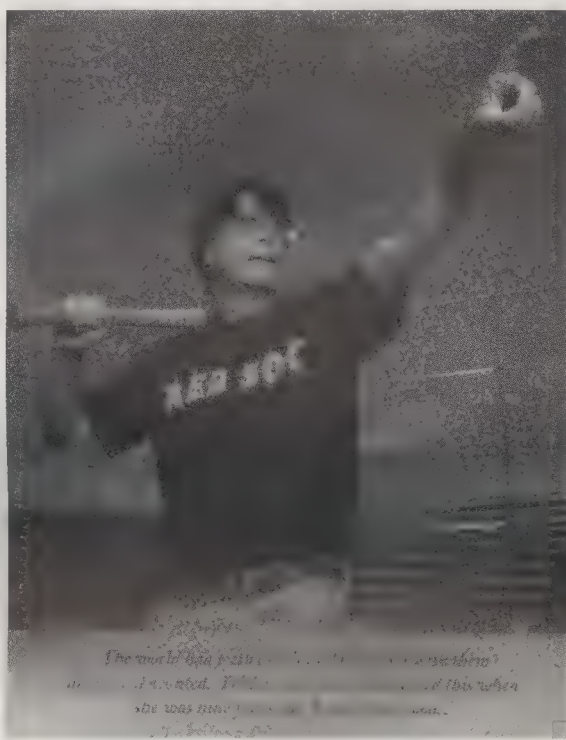
The novel (which, at 212 pages, is short by King's standards) is one of those indefinable jobs that can be taken in on many levels. Okay, maybe it's a hymn to baseball *per se*, but it's also a back-to-nature tale... a literary travelogue of deprivation and survival. At the same time, it's a flat-out young adults' or even *children's* adventure saga; it's a cautionary bugle-call against the harmful effects caused to children by unstable family situations; a semi-fantastical allegory that touches on the power of adulation and belief; and a Gothic treatise that suggests the existence of a malevolent entity that prowls the uncharted wilderness preying on those unfortunate or just plain foolish enough to venture into its domain.

Tom Gordon is a real-life pitcher for the Boston Red Sox.

The girl who loves him is Trisha McFarland, a nine-year-old who ducks out of sight on a walk through the woods – ostensibly to relieve her bladder but more realistically to get away from her mother's endless arguing with her (Trisha's) older brother – only to discover she can't find her way back. With supplies that comprise only a few sticks of celery, a sandwich, a hard-boiled egg, a bottle of soda pop and a Walkman radio, she moves deeper and deeper into the forest in an effort to regain the path she left.

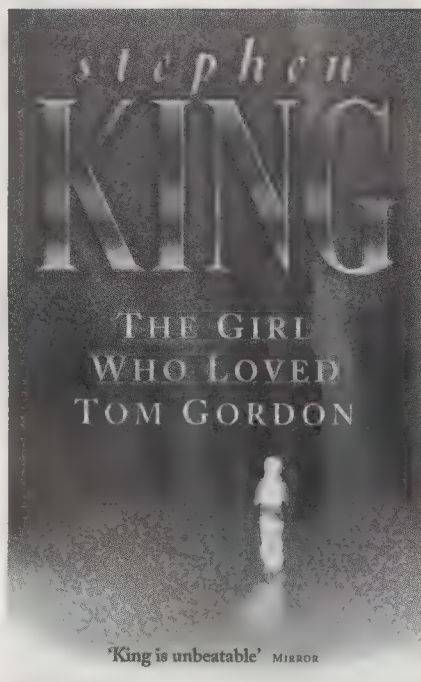
As the minutes turn to hours and the hours into days, she fights the growing belief that something is watching her – *tracking* her – by using the Walkman's broadcasts of the Red Sox team's games to bring civilization closer... and to keep the unknown at bay.

Impenetrable swamps, wasps' nests, snakes, mosquitoes, surprise cliff-edges and untreated water would be more than enough to make it a journey to remember... but it's Trisha's discovery, in the most inhospitable depths of the forest, of a deer's head and the various pieces of its anatomy – arranged not so much a warning of what *might* happen, as a promise of what *will* – that clinches it. And then, when the batteries on the Walkman run down, Trisha is left only with her imagination – in the form of Gordon himself – to speak to her about the secret of "winning." And it is Gordon who "stands by her side" when the presence that has



been dogging her steps finally steps out from the trees to confront her.

The basic idea for *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* is one of such scope and ambition that it would have been easy for the project to fall flat on its face. And in lesser hands, it could well have done just that. But King has proven himself time and again a consummate master of describing situations and of letting us into the heads of children and adults and monsters alike, and he's perfectly at home here. And he makes *us* so much at home that, even *with* the forest's stark lack of hospitality, when



the final page has been read we're already yearning to get back.

In one of last year's issues of *Locus* magazine, Lucy Taylor, author of the excellent Stoker Award-winning debut novel *The Safety of Unknown Cities*, came across, both visually and through her answers to the interviewer's questions, as being a gentle sort of character. Try keeping that in mind while you're reading *Spree* (CD Publications, \$30).

This second of CD's series of hard-back novellas is a cross between Jim Thompson's and James M. Cain's hopelessly down-spiralling narratives of losers looking for more losses to take on and Bradley Denton's wonderful novel of the disenchanted (but eminently sympathetic and even downright loveable) sociopath, *Blackburn*.

The story begins with the narrator, Lonny Flynn, a (semi-)former alcoholic drug addict coming up to release-day from the local Penitentiary where he's been serving time – two-and-a-half years of it. He's tired of being inside, he's horny as hell and he's mad enough at a few people on the outside not to give a damn about what happens when he gets free. Because he's going to fix them, and he's going to fix them good. Which he does.

*Spree* is definitely *not* for the faint-hearted but it's a fun read, despite its excesses.

And finally, just space to mention three marvellous buys for crime-and-mystery buffs: Tom Piccirilli's *The Dead Past* (Write Way Publishing, \$21.95) – in which the discovery of the corpse of a small-time crook in his aunt's dustbin marks the first of a projected series of small-town whodunnits for amateur sleuth Jonathan Kendrick, with number two (*Sorrow's Crown*) expected in late spring; Ed Gorman's *The Day the Music Died* (Carroll & Graf, \$22.95), another appetite-whetter for what promises to be a memorable run of mysteries set in the late 1950s (try to imagine Raymond Chandler writing the *Archie* comicbooks and you'll get some idea of how enjoyable *this* one is!); and Leigh Brackett's *No Good From a Corpse* (Dennis McMillan Publications, \$35), which reprints the title novel (from 1944 – and still reading as fresh as though it was written yesterday) plus a handful of Brackett's other pulp-magazine detective stories and novellas, most of which are of the same vintage, and features Foreword and Afterword from Ray Bradbury and Michael Connelly respectively.

Peter Crowther



The human race – the cosmic joke, if the books hereunder are to be believed – is a bizarre concoction of rage, jealousy, idiocy, and sexual experimentation. None of which is *news*, but even more so than usual with sf, the first three books take a good, hard look at *Homo sapiens* – from the points of view of apes, gods and aliens, respectively.

Will Self's *Great Apes* (Penguin, £6.99) is a big fat book with a small thin idea as its central premise. A man wakes up one day to find out that he's no longer human. Our subject is Simon Dykes, an artist with a new exhibition – a phantasmagoria of human foibles – opening soon. His life is one of privilege: he is dating a woman who fantasizes about his penis (and who is jealous of the number of women that Simon has slept with, and the number of "cunt-sucks" he has administered). Simon has friends, and an endless supply of drugs to ingest. But after a spectacular binge of narcotics, and an equally spectacular session in the sack (which goes on for page after boring page), Simon becomes a chimpanzee:

"Simon sniffed, simiously. A clutch of hairs on Sarah's teat was actually pushed up his nostril, in amongst the crapulent deposits. A clutch of large hairs that smelt indefinitely – for Simon – of chimpanzee. Chimpanzee, warm, cuddly furriness. Chimpanzee post-coital smell of sweat infused through fur..." After this dopey awakening, he cannot bear his girlfriend (also a chimpanzee) to come near. He is hauled off for psychiatric assessment by a variety of apes. "He believes that he has gone completely mad and that the world he now perceives is a psychotic delusion," one affirms.

In the new world, details are similar to the one he has left behind. Chimps drive cars; the exhibition opens and Simon's work is reviewed (savagely) by chimp critics. But the established tenets of humanity – family, monogamy, and intimacy – are challenged; and a young female chimp can develop a complex if her father *doesn't* want to have sex with her. A meeting with an old colleague can sound like this: "I haven't had my fingers in your fur for what... must be more than six months now..." Evolution has placed one of our close genetic "rivals" in a position of power; it is humans who can be laughed at in zoos. And Simon must adapt; he must recover from the delusion that he is human, which he continues to maintain (well, you would, wouldn't you?) for a long, long time. He learns to sign, to knuckle-walk, to "pant-hoot" – although the thought of grooming leaves him cold...

## Porno-Value Primates

David Mathew

Will Self works wonders with transformations, creating comedy by thrusting change into a character's life. Here, it is apes; elsewhere, for example, there is a man who grows a vagina on the back of his knee. But often he pummels an idea until it is weak; perhaps the long form is a little bit *too* long. *Great Apes*, at 404 pages, meanders along. Self's command of the English language is impressive, but he shows off every word he knows, routinely describing events in three or four different ways, using every synonym available.

A few years ago, before anyone knew much about Self, a rumour circulated: in the true post-modern fashion, this had nothing to do with literary calibre, but with the proposition that he might not be a real person: "Will Self" was the creation of Martin Amis. There was some hard-fought link to the John Self character in Amis's novel *Money*, and the (undeniable) comparison with Amis's own fondness for exuberant over-explana-

tion. But I think another discussion about Self is much more pertinent:

Is he actually any good at writing novels? Self's lippy, orgiastic prose occludes all rational thought, and we are drawn into the story like good little humans, prepared to believe every word. But as bizarre, as readable, and as fine as it is at satirizing our contemporary society and its inherent consumerism and greed, *Great Apes* should have been a novella. Or maybe the literary excess is part of the point, as it was with Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. *Great Apes* is similar in temperament to Swift and Kafka.

A friend once opined that it must be great to vent one's spleen and to wield the tools of eloquent butchery in the face of texts that one hates. But personally, I find it *difficult* to hate a book. To be bored with a book is a cinch... but to *hate* one? That requires compunctious energy; and I don't have enough to spare. I think of the hours that the writer spent, and not liking the result is a long, long way from hating it. The only book in my past that I remember genuinely *hating* was *A Masculine Ending* by Joan Smith. But now, joining that loathsome text in the small circle on the playground's concrete, is Peter Chippindale's *Laptop of the Gods* (Simon & Schuster, £9.99): a ghastly endeavour if ever there was one.

Comedy is a no-laughs business, if you're creating it. But one shouldn't hate a book simply because it failed to make one smile (this, at any rate, is not the case: I *did* smile, once, at a joke on page 12, as the gods are singing: "Talkin' 'bout my v-v-v-veneration"); but one certainly can hate a book, as is the case here (and was the case with *A Masculine Ending*), when the reader is being disdainfully patronized. In a plot in which a group of off-the-peg gods (facetless, vacuous) are awaiting the millennium and are squabbling among themselves – over land rights, among other things – the reader is force-fed so many of what must be Chippindale's personal beliefs that the idea of *Laptop of the Gods* being a *novel* approaches the laughable in itself. This is tub-thumping at its most monotonous; this is Speaker's Corner bile. Chosen at random:

"However much you were for the new age, you had to admit it was largely the province of the young, the educated, the beautiful people from the middle classes with the time to enjoy just being hippies and swingers. Of whom, of course, you also had to recognize a fair proportion were absolute shits. Especially those reared by Britain's public-school sys-



PAUL BRAZIER

Will Self,  
author of  
*Great Apes*

tem."

GOD is the computer which runs the universe, and it offers the arguing deities the chance to play VR games in Mega Retroland *ad infinitum*. They take GOD up on the offer, except for Jupiter and Juno, both of whom are worried that human society is curdling, if not actively rotting away. When it becomes clear that the Beast has had something to do with getting most of the gods off the scene, a race to save godhood and humankind begins.

When he is not on his soapbox, Chippindale is merely bland. If you used to recite long passages from (successively) *Monty Python*, *The Young Ones*, or Reeves and Mortimer's first series, then you might enjoy this book. It has the feel of grubby second-handness about it, with every comic possibility smothered and strangled. For example, back to when the gods are singing, there are the following examples: "We're computer GOD's Immortal Spirits Band," or "All you need are gods... Dum de de diddy dum!" or "We all live in Neptune's godmarine."

Long before it had been established scientifically that laughter is good for us, and why, our instincts had provided us with the same information. Laughter is the release of emotional pain; or, more helpfully perhaps, is our way of sorting information in a new manner – and a fresh perspective can often lead to a better solution.

The problem is, we all disagree about what happens to be *funny*. Peter Chippindale has written two other books, neither of which I have read, but one of which, *Stick It Up Your Punter*, was reviewed recently. It came as no great surprise to learn that Chippindale has connections with *The Sun*.

**W**ith *His Majesty's Starship* (Scholastic, £5.99), Ben Jeapes makes his fictional debut in the long form, and it's a volume bursting with fun and energy. Written for a publisher specializing in fiction for young adults, this is nevertheless a more mature offering than the Chippindale abortion. Jeapes writes with a balanced pen, and nothing seems forced.

An invitation is made to the good people of Earth to share a part of the universe with a race of intelligent (and beautifully delineated) aliens. Mike Gilmore is instructed to put together a team of spacefaring professionals, but he must also take a headstrong prince, who is not all that he seems to be; aside from the fact that he's foolishly reluctant to strap himself down just before the ship is "boosting at one point three gees," he

also secretes industrial-sized explosive weapons on the ship, without the captain's consent or knowledge. (How he does so is plausible.)

Jeapes's antihuman satire is of a light touch. When the alien representative makes his report about the crew, it is done with little malice. Sure enough, Jeapes includes the odd remark about how awful we all are, but these examples are snacks, rather than the three-course meals in Chippindale's book: "they make every effort to hide the truth of their past: the fact that they had had wars, polluted their planet, wiped out species and so forth." Need it be said that the consequences of the merger are not all pleasant? On board a different vessel altogether is a homicidal loon with a bigger axe than usual to grind; there are those explosives, which the God of Plot has decreed should be used at some point; and there is an examination of the basic human tendency to ruin situations while on the road to comprehension.

**R**obert Silverberg's *Lord Prestimion* (Voyager, £16.99) is a wonderful piece of work. It is, as the cover asserts, "a magnificent epic in the Majipoor cycle." It is very loveable. The story revolves around our eponymous and sulky hero, who has recently arrived in power, following a civil war which only came to an end after a spell was invoked that made everyone forget that the conflicts ever existed. Time has been nibbled away like an annoying fingernail. But the consequences of this erosion are serious: people are going mad, as Prestimion and his cohorts discover when they go walkabout among the subjects, wearing pantomime fake beards and the like. The madness manifests itself in the guise of suicides leaping

from windows, thereby destroying passers-by; or in the guise of a madman on the river, ramming others' boats with his own. Prestimion wants to understand the madness because in part he feels responsible for it.

Not that strange occurrences are the sum of Prestimion's problems. One of his enemies from the war is in prison for his crimes, but cannot of course remember of what he is guilty. Proving that Prestimion has a healthy respect for revenge and justice, he arranges for this prisoner to regain his memory. And then the man can be legally tried.

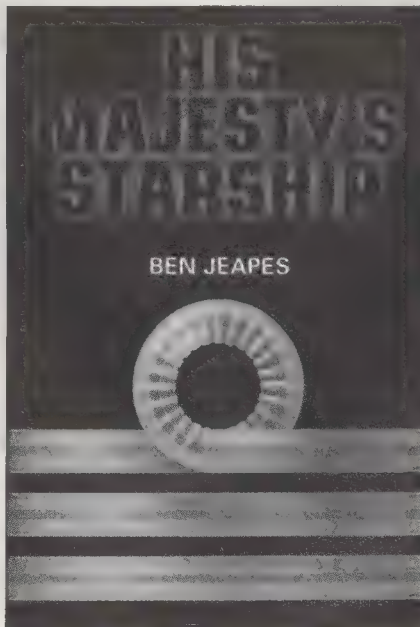
Prestimion lost a loved one in the war, and only now – as he follows the flow of leadership – does he set about reforming his love life, eventually marrying a young woman connected to the household from which the suicidal girl jumped. The bride's father (a hideous salesman and entrepreneur) contracts the madness, and he, along with others, begins to suspect that there is something eerie about what seems to be a patch of time missing from Majipoor's memory.

**O**ne more book to note, and it seems a shame to reduce it to the equivalent of a poking of the ashes. It deserves much more than that, does the dreadfully-titled *Flying Cups & Saucers* (Edgewood Press, \$18). Edited by Debbie Notkin and "the Secret Feminist Cabal," this is an anthology that has been designed to explore gender roles, in homage to the work of James Tiptree, Jr. Now, for the benefit of any newcomers, Tiptree was a man who was really a woman: that is, a woman who wrote under a male pseudonym and gathered plaudits for the incisive twanging of both bra-straps and Y-fronts; a woman who wrote so convincingly "as a man" that when a rumour circulated that it might be a woman after all who was writing these texts, no less an authority than Robert Silverberg panted that such a thing was not possible. Tiptree was a man and there was an end to it.

Wrong. On both counts.

After Notkin's enapt and informative introduction ("Why Have a Tiptree Award?"), the reader is treated to no fewer than 13 reprinted stories, the majority of which are top-notch. From *Interzone* there is "Eat Reecebread" by Graham Joyce and Peter F. Hamilton, from '94; and other highlights are Lisa Tuttle's "Food Man," Ian R. MacLeod's "Grownups" and Ian McDonald's "Some Strange Desire." This volume is recommended.

David Mathew



# BOOKS RECEIVED



FEBRUARY  
1999

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Piers. **Muse of Art: Geodyssey, Volume 4.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86896-0, 445pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; we saw the second book in this series, *Shame of Man*, in 1994, on which occasion we wrote: "a follow-up to *Isle of Woman*... it would be inaccurate to call the second book a sequel to the first, since it actually begins its very episodic narrative some millions of years earlier and then does a retake on the span of human history which was covered in volume one; there are hundreds of prehistoric romances being published these days, but Anthony is attempting something more ambitious [if damnably difficult] in these books, and he deserves credit for it"; unfortunately, we were not sent volume three, which apparently was called *Hope of Earth*; the series has not been published in Britain; nor have we seen these novels reviewed or discussed anywhere, though they seem to be Anthony's most serious fiction of recent decades.) *May 1999.*

Ab Hugh, Daffyd. **The Conquered: Rebels, Book One of Three.** "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine #24." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-01140-5, 233pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the novel's actual title – *The Conquered* – does not appear on cover or spine; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *February 1999.*

Ab Hugh, Daffyd. **The Courageous: Rebels, Book Two of Three.** "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine #25." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-01141-3, 235pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff

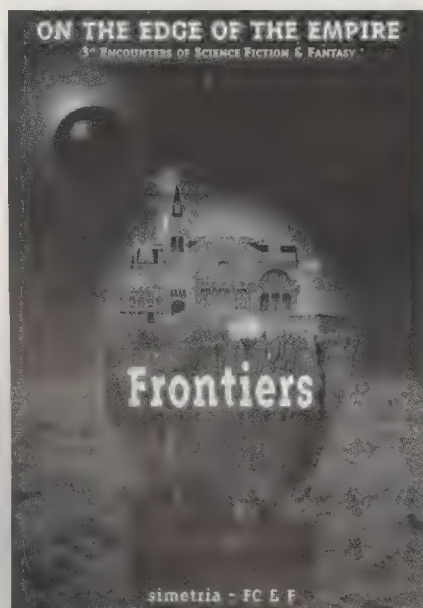
novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the novel's actual title – *The Courageous* – does not appear on cover or spine; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *February 1999.*

Allston, Aaron. **Solo Command: X-Wing, Book Seven.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50605-6, 341pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) *11th March 1999.*

Anderson, Poul. **Operation Luna.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86706-9, 316pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "the long-awaited sequel to *Operation Chaos*," set in a modern-day world where magic exists; like its predecessor of 30 years ago, it's a peculiarly "pure" example of the mixed science-fantasy form – pentacles and spacecraft rub shoulders in the second paragraph.) *August 1999.*

Ashley, Mike, ed. **Royal Whodunnits.** "Tales of Right Royal Murder and Mystery." Foreword by Paul C. Doherty. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-893-X, xiii+434pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Crime-fiction anthology, first edition; as with such other Ashley-edited volumes as *Shakespearean Whodunnits* [1997] and *Shakespearean Detectives* [1998], this is listed here as of "associational" interest, containing as it does original stories by, among others, Cherith Baldry, Paul Barnett, Stephen Baxter, Edward D. Hoch, Liz Holliday, Tom Holt, Andy Lane, Morgan Llywelyn, Richard A. Lupoff and Peter Tremayne – all of whom have written sf, horror or fantasy in the past.) *25th February 1999.*

Augusta, Maria, and Antonio de Macedo, eds. **Frontiers/Fronteiras.** Foreword by Teresa Sousa de Almeida. Simetria [Bloco UV-2, 0.º Piso, Porta 11 Outeiro da Vela, 2750 Cascais, Portugal], ISBN 972-97495-1-5, 193pp + 199pp, trade paperback, cover by Ricardo Monteiro, no price shown. (Sf anthology, first edition; published to coincide with the third annual sf conference held in Cascais, near Lisbon, Portugal, "On the Edge of the Empire: 3rd Encounters of Science Fiction & the Fantastic," it contains stories by last year's British guests of honour, Stephen Baxter and Gwyneth Jones [the latter's piece, "La Cenerentola," also appeared in *Interzone* 136], plus eight stories by Portuguese-based authors [one of whom, David Alan Prescott, is actually of British origin]; the texts are presented in both Portuguese and English, *dos à dos*; the introduction by Teresa Sousa de Almeida, entitled "Science Fiction in Portugal," is interesting and



informative, though written in a rather academic manner.) *Late entry: September 1998 publication, received in February 1999.*

Benford, Gregory. **Cosm.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79052-1, 378pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; a hard-sf thriller, touted as Benford's most ambitious fictionalization of the methodology of science since *Timescape* [1980]; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 132.) *February 1999.*

Benford, Gregory. **Deep Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia.** Avon/Bard, ISBN 0-380-97537-8, 225pp, hardcover, cover by Tom Canty, \$20. (Popular science text, first edition; this looks interesting: a respected hard sf writer [and physicist], in his first non-fiction book, muses on the ways in which human beings have tried to transcend time and mortality – from pyramids to space probes.) *February 1999.*

Britain, Kristen. **Green Rider.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-684-85828-2, 504pp, C-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; a BCF [Big Commercial Fantasy] debut novel by a new American writer; commended by three of the usuals – Marion Zimmer Bradley, Terry Goodkind and Anne McCaffrey.) *1st March 1999.*

Carey, Diane, and others. **Star Trek: Day of Honor.** "The best-selling Klingon saga – complete in one volume!" Pocket, ISBN 0-671-02813-8, 1096pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Omnibus of sf TV-series spinoff novels [and one script novelization], first published in the USA, 1999; the six novels included in this hefty tome are *Ancient Blood* by Diane Carey, *Armageddon Sky* by L. A. Graf, *Her Klingon Soul* by Michael Jan Friedman, *Treaty's Law* by Dean Wesley Smith & Kristine Kathryn Rusch, *Day of Honor* by Michael Jan Friedman [based on script by Jeri Taylor] and *Honor Bound* by Diana G. Gallagher; all were originally published as separate books in 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *March 1999.*

Champetier, Joel. **The Dragon's Eye.** Translated by Jean-Louis Trudel. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86882-0, 301pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first published in Quebec as *La taupe et le dragon*, 1991; proof copy received; Champetier is described as "a leading French Canadian sf writer; the winner of the Prix Boreal and the Aurora Award... *The Dragon's Eye* is his first novel to be translated into English, allowing American readers to appreciate this world-class sf talent"; despite the author's Canadianness, and his Frenchness, this book seems to be an example of *chinoiserie*, set on a planet called New China.) *May 1999.*

Chapman, Vera. **The Enchantresses.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60325-9, 223pp, A-format paperback, cover by Harvey Parker, £5.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in 1998; Vera Chapman died a few years ago at the age of 98, and this posthumous book of three linked stories was edited for publication by Mike Ashley.) *25th February 1999.*

De Lint, Charles. **Someplace to be Flying.** "An Urban Fantasy." Pan, ISBN 0-330-36870-2, 620pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fletcher Sibthorp, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) *12th March 1999.*

Doyle, Debra, and James D. Macdonald. **The Stars Asunder.** "A new novel of the Mage-worlds." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86410-8, 351pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; "a popular sf adventure series comes to hardcover for the first time," say the publishers; set in a universe where "the star systems of the Mages are linked by magic,"

it's the first book we've seen by this husband-and-wife writing team, but they appear to be responsible for at least five paperback-original earlier titles in the series.) *June 1999.*

Edwards, Ted. **The Unauthorized Star Wars Compendium: The Complete Guide to the Movies, Comic Books, Novels, and More.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-1188-9, viii+232pp, square large-format paperback, £9.99. (Lightly illustrated guide to the various media and formats which make up the "Star Wars" universe created by film-maker George Lucas; first published in the USA, 1999; no doubt published to cash in early on the tsunami of "official" *Star Wars* publicity which is about to engulf us all upon the release of the new film; interestingly, in an old interview quoted on page 4 [Edwards doesn't give sources for his quotes], Lucas states that the beginning of the tradition which led to *Star Wars* was "a science fantasy called *Gulliver on Mars*, written by Edwin Arnold and published in 1905"; he means *Lieut. Gulliver Jones: His Vacation* by Edwin Lester Arnold [a British writer, 1857-1935], which was reprinted by Ace Books in the 1960s as *Gulliver of Mars* [with its hero's name re-spelled]; what a small acorn for such a mighty oak tree to have grown from!) *19th February 1999.*

Feist, Raymond E. **Krondor: The Betrayal: Book I of the Riftwar Legacy.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224699-6, 352pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £10.99. (Fantasy computer-game novelization, first published in the USA, 1998; based on the game *Betrayal at Krondor* published by Dynamix, Inc.; there is an author's afterword which explains the book's provenance.) *15th March 1999.*

Goodkind, Terry. **Soul of the Fire.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-89054-0, 508pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is Book Five of "The Sword of Truth," although the proof does not state as much on cover or title page.) *March 1999.*

Gotlieb, Phyllis. **Violent Stars.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86953-3, 284pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; by the grande dame of Canadian sf, a sequel to her "come-back" novel of 1998, *Flesh and Gold*.) *May 1999.*

Green, Sharon. **Betrays: Book Four of The Blending.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78810-1, 388pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tom Canty, \$6.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Convergence* [1996], *Competitions* [1997] and *Challenges* [1998].) *February 1999.*

Hamilton, Peter F. **A Second Chance at Eden.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-73853-5, ix+431pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £10.99. (Sf collection, first published in 1998; it contains the title novella, new to this book, the novelette "Escape Route," first published in *Interzone* in 1997, and five short stories, a couple of which first appeared in David Garnett's *New Worlds* anthologies; all are set in the same universe as Hamilton's ongoing "Night's Dawn" trilogy of novels; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 138.) *12th March 1999.*

Hobb, Robin. **Ship of Magic: The Liveship Traders, Book I.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649885-X, xii+880pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; first in a new series about living ships; reviewed, very positively, by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 132; "Robin Hobb" is a pseudonym for Megan Lindholm.) *1st March 1999.*

Holt, Tom. **Only Human.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-693-9, 343pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Cemmick,

£15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; it's dedicated to Brummie bookdealer Roger Peyton, "my favourite Ferengi.") *4th March 1999.*

Huberman, Carl. **Welcome to the 51st State.** "In the underworld of secrets, curiosity kills." Pan, ISBN 0-330-36777-3, 392pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf [?] thriller, first edition; it's not immediately apparent why this has been sent to us – other than the fact that it has a flying saucer on the cover [although whether that's intended "literally" or "metaphorically" is not clear]; the author, despite his American-sounding Germanic name, seems to be British, and has already written a number of thrillers; this one appears to stray into *X-Files* territory.) *12th March 1999.*

Johanson, Paula, and Jean-Louis Trudel, eds. **Tesseract 7: New Canadian Speculative Fiction.** Tesseract Books [214-21 10405 Jasper Ave., Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3S2, Canada], ISBN 1-895836-58-1, 283pp, trade paperback, Canadian \$9.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; this is the eighth in a series of anthologies [yes, eighth – the previous volumes were *Tesseracts 1-6* and *Tesseracts Q*] which we have not been sent for review before now; it contains all-new stories and a few poems by Cory Doctorow, Candace Jane Dorsey, Jan Lars Jensen, Eileen Kernaghan, Shirley Meir, Yves Meynard, Teresa Plowright, Karl Schroeder, Elisabeth Vonarburg, Andrew Weiner and many others less well known; a number of stories are translated from French, and one from Spanish [the author of the last, Eduardo Frank, is Cuban-born but lives in Newfoundland]; note how the term "speculative fiction," rather passé everywhere else, is still alive and well in Canada – they do seem to prefer it to the label "science fiction," and why not?) *Late entry: 1998 publication, received in February 1999.*

Jones, Gwyneth. **Phoenix Café.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86834-0, 350pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1997; follow-up to the author's highly-praised *White Queen* and *North Wind*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 118.) *January 1999.*

Jones, Jenny. **Where the Children Cry.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60077-2, 384pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1998; reviewed by Paul J. McAuley in *Interzone* 130; this must be among the last Vista paperbacks to appear, since that list is due to be folded into the Orion/Millennium list following Gollancz's takeover.) *25th February 1999.*

Louys, Pierre. **The Woman and the Puppet.** Translated by Jeremy Moore. "Dedalus European Classics." Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-29-1, 168pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (*Femme-fatale* novella, first published in France as *La femme et le pantin*, 1898; this was the story which inspired Josef von Sternberg's famous movie *The Devil is a Woman* [1935], a still from which, featuring Marlene Dietrich, adorns the cover; it's not clear whether there is any fantasy content whatsoever, and unfortunately this edition contains no introduction or afterword to set the work in context.) *25th March 1999.*

Lynn, Elizabeth A. **Dragon's Winter.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-35557-0, 442pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 131.) *20th March 1999.*

Mallory, James. **Merlin: The Old Magic.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651289-5, 335pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Arthurian fantasy TV mini-series novelization, first published in the USA,

1998; copyrighted "Hallmark Entertainment Inc.," it's based on the script by David Stevens and Peter Barnes ["story by Edward Khmara"] for the mini-series [American TV-speak for "serial"] directed by Steve Barron, starring New Zealander Sam Neill as Merlin; it's also advertised as the first of a series of novels; the hitherto-unknown author lives in New York – in this context, "Mallory" smells of pseudonym.) *15th March 1999.*

Mank, Gregory William. **Women in Horror Films, 1930s.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0553-8, xi+403pp, hardcover, \$45. (Illustrated study of Hollywood horror-movie actresses during the decade in question; first edition; among those whose careers are studied in some depth are Marian Marsh, Mae Clarke, Miriam Hopkins, Olga Baclanova, Gloria Stuart, Fay Wray [the one everybody has heard of, even the non-movie buffs – which goes to show there's a lot of mileage in a good name], Zita Johann, Una O'Connor, Elsa Lanchester and Valerie Hobson; some, such as the last two named, were British: did you know that Valerie Hobson [from *Bride of Frankenstein*, 1935] was later Mrs John Profumo, of Profumo Scandal fame? – fancy that, an erstwhile Hollywood sex goddess, stood-up for Christine Keeler!) *April 1999.*

Mank, Gregory William. **Women in Horror Films, 1940s.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-0464-7, xi+393pp, hardcover, \$45. (Illustrated study of Hollywood horror-movie actresses during the decade in question; first edition; second of a simultaneously-published two-volume set: the two volumes are available at \$75 for the pair; among those whose careers are studied here are Evelyn Ankers, Maria Ouspenskaya, Simone Simon, Acquanetta, Gale Sondergaard, Anna Lee and others whose names are more obscure; again, many of the more memorable women represented here were non-Americans – sundry Russians, Frenchwomen, Scandinavians and the like, all gathered to "golden-age" Hollywood's welcoming bosom.) *April 1999.*

Nicholls, Stan. **Bodyguard of Lightning: Orcs, First Blood.** Millennium, 1-85798-557-5, 298pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; to the best of our knowledge, this is Stan Nicholls's first novel aimed at an adult market, following several books for children.) *25th February 1999.*

Niven, Larry. **The Flight of the Horse.** "The adventures in time of Hanville Svetz, hero of *Rainbow Mars*." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-841-9, 212pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Andrew Jones, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1974; seventh Futura/Orbit printing; it contains seven stories, five of which – "The Flight of the Horse" [1969], "Leviathan!" [1970], "Bird in the Hand" [1970], "There's a Wolf in My Time Machine" [1971] and "Death in a Cage" [1973] – are reprinted in the American edition of Niven's new novel [see below]; the other two here are "Flash Crowder" [1973] and "What Good is a Glass Dagger?" [1972].) *4th March 1999.*

Niven, Larry. **Rainbow Mars.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-844-3, 227pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £16.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; unlike the American edition [Tor Books], which also contains a bunch of old short stories, this UK edition consists only of the new "Hanville Svetz" novel: it's set on Mars and involves time travel.) *4th March 1999.*

O'Shaughnessy, Darren. **Ayuarmarca: Procession of the Dead: The City, Book 1.** Orion/Millennium, 0-75281-639-X, 404pp, A-



format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new Irish writer, aged 24, "an extraordinary evocation of a fantastic parallel world of ancient mysteries [it opens in the lost city of Machu Picchu, Peru]... reminiscent of the best of Clive Barker and Iain Banks"; we wish the author well, but it's a pity about the hard-to-pronounce and over-complicated title – it doesn't exactly roll off the tongue like *The Wasp Factory*, does it?; also, it's unclear whether this is meant to be a Millennium book or not: its states "Orion Fiction" on the back cover, but has "Millennium" buried away on the reverse title page – it's odd how publishers sometimes fail to have the conviction of their own imprint names.) 25th February 1999.

Park, Severna. **Hand of Prophecy.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79158-7, 307pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; its author's second book, Elizabeth Hand commends it as "a terrific novel" and says that Park is "an important new novelist to watch"; we commented of the hardcover edition: "it appears to be an intellectualized, futuristic, slaver-cum-gladiatorial fantasy.") February 1999.

Pierce, Tamora. **The Power in the Storm: Circle of Magic, 2.** Scholastic Press, 0-590-54222-2, 203pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 19th February 1999.

Pohl, Frederik, ed. **The SFWA Grand Masters, Volume One.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86881-2, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains three or four stories apiece by Robert A. Heinlein, Jack Williamson, Clifford D. Simak, Fritz Leiber and L. Sprague de Camp – the first five winners of the Science Fiction Writers of America's "Grand Master" award; of the five masters, three – Heinlein, Simak and Leiber – are now deceased; a worthy anthology of, inevitably, very familiar material.) June 1999.

Price, Susan. **The Ghost Wife.** "Point Horror Unleashed." Scholastic, 0-590-11384-4, 174pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition; this is by the author of *The Sterkarm Handshake*, recently shortlisted for the *Guardian's* children's fiction prize for 1998 along with novels by Tanith Lee and others.) 20th November 1998.

Reynolds, Mack. **Mission to Horatius.** "Star Trek." Illustrated by Sparky Moore. Pocket, ISBN 0-671-02818-X, 210pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Sf TV-series juvenile spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1968; this is a facsimile reprint of a long-lost "original" Trek novel, first published two years before James Blish's *Spock Must Die!* [which is usually regarded as the first of its sort]; it was released as a one-off in the now-defunct Whitman series of kids' cheap hardcover books [devoted mainly to Roy Rogers, Lassie and other ancient movie-and-TV favourites]; it's ironic that the late Mack Reynolds – not a very good writer but undoubtedly a serious one, noted for his Marxist themes and probably the only left-winger to become a mainstay of John W. Campbell's *Analog* magazine – who was once so prolific and is now so deeply out-of-print, may be remembered in the future solely for this petty item which he probably tossed off in a week or two [that is, he will be remembered for it if the "religion" of *Star Trek* continues to grow apace].) March 1999.

Robins, Madeleine E. **The Stone War.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85486-2, 317pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new American writer, it looks to be a thoroughly "New York" urban fantasy, and

comes with commendations from the likes of Elizabeth A. Lynn, Maureen F. McHugh, Susan Palwick and Delia Sherman – which means it must be over on the lit'ry wing of the field.) July 1999.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **The Memory of Whiteness.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648256-2, 351pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985.) 15th March 1999.

Salvatore, R. A. **The Dragon King.** "Book 3 of *The Crimson Shadow.*" Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648345-3, 344pp, A-format paperback, cover by Harvey Parker, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 1st March 1999.

Sheffield, Charles, ed. **How to Save the World.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86784-0, 349pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1995; all-new "technofix" stories by Doug Beason, James P. Hogan, Kathe Koja & Barry Malzberg, Geoffrey A. Landis, Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, Mary Turzillo, Lawrence Watt-Evans and others.) February 1999.

Sherwin, Jill. **Quotable Star Trek.** Pocket, ISBN 0-671-02457-4, x+374pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf TV-series "dictionary of quotations," first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) March 1999.

Shirmerman, Armin, and David George. **The 34th Rule.** "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine #23." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-00793-9, viii+425pp, A-format paperback, cover by Sonia R. Hillios, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1999; Shirmerman is the actor who plays Quark in the TV series; the second author's name is given on the cover as "David R. George III"; very much fatter than the general run of Trek books, it's probably a debut novel for both writers; a third contributor to the story-line, Eric A. Stillwell, is also credited; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) January 1999.

Wagner, Jon, and Jan Lundeen. **Deep Space and Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos.** Praeger [distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU], ISBN 0-275-96225-3, xiii+264pp, hardcover, £19.95. ("Mythological" study of the sf TV series

and its fandom, first published in the USA, 1998; this is the American edition with a British price added; Wagner is a professor of anthropology, and Lundeen teaches nursing; more and more grown-up *Star Trek* fans like these two are gaining positions of influence in American society, which means we'll probably see many more serious-minded books such as this, full of soothing words like "hope," "growth" and "empowerment"; when will we see the first *Star Trek* President? – perhaps Al Gore is, in a sense, destined to be that.) Late entry: November 1998 publication, received in February 1999.

Warrington, Freda. **The Amber Citadel: Book One of The Jewelfire Trilogy.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-02190-7, 599pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick van Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this is the first new novel by Warrington we have seen in some years; it seems she is returning to her roots in heroic fantasy after a while spent in the field of Anne Rice-lookalike vampire fiction issued by that "invisible" publisher Penguin.) 1st March 1999.

Watts, Peter. **Starfish.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86855-3, 317pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new Canadian writer, it concerns undersea exploration in the near future.) July 1999.

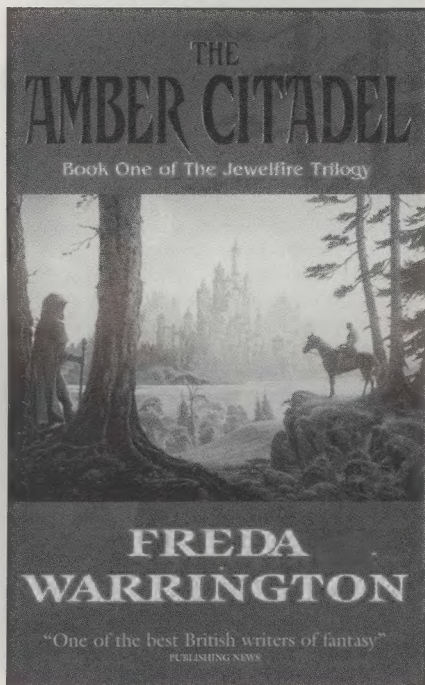
Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **Nightsword: A Starshield Novel.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-728-5, 468pp, hardcover, cover by Gerry Grace, £6.99. (Science-fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; sequel to *Starshield: Sentinels* [1996; published in Britain as *The Mantle of Kendis-Dai*, 1998]; yet more space-operatics from these well-known fantasy writers.) 4th March 1999.

Wooding, Chris. **Kerosene.** Scholastic Press, 0-590-11358-5, 213pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Juvenile horror [?] novel, first edition; it's about a pyromaniac kid, but it's not clear whether there's any fantastic content; the author, whose fourth novel this seems to be, was born in, gulp, 1977.) February [?] 1999.

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. **The Soul of an Angel: Sisters of the Night [Volume Two].** Illustrated by Christopher H. Bing. Avon, ISBN 0-380-97401-0, 378pp, hardcover, cover by Bing, \$24. (Historical horror novel, spun off from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; first edition; the second in a trilogy dealing with the lives of the three vampire sisters who appeared briefly in Stoker's novel, it's a "packaged" book in which copyright is shared by Yarbro and an outfit called Swordsmith Productions [editor Leigh Grossman, associate editor Lesley McBain... and so on in a listing that resembles the credits of a Hollywood movie].) 9th March 1999.

## Addendum:

**Sci-Fi's Greatest Hits.** "The Sci-Fi Channel Presents." Edel Records [12 Oval Rd., London NW1 7DH], four compact discs, no price shown. (Compilation of film and TV music, taken from sf movies and series, mainly American; there are circa 120 tracks, arranged on four discs subtitled "Final Frontiers," "The Dark Side," "The Uninvited" and "Defenders of Justice"; so far as we can tell, they consist of the original recordings [or extracts from them, at any rate], not recent re-recordings; odd that the publishers don't put a price on the set anywhere – not even on the accompanying publicity sheet – so we can't say whether it represents good value for money or not; but for those who like this sort of thing it probably is...) 29th March 1999.



### WRITERS' WORKSHOP NEEDS

**MEMBERS!** Published non-fiction writer hoping to break into fiction seeks other like-minded people to critique each other's work in a friendly and constructive atmosphere. Meetings will be held within reach of Aylesbury (from Oxford to Watford). Contact: Jane Killick, 27 Rothschild Avenue, Aston Clinton, Aylesbury, Bucks. HP22 5LY. Tel: 01296 630663. Or e-mail: [JaneKillick@compuserve.com](mailto:JaneKillick@compuserve.com)

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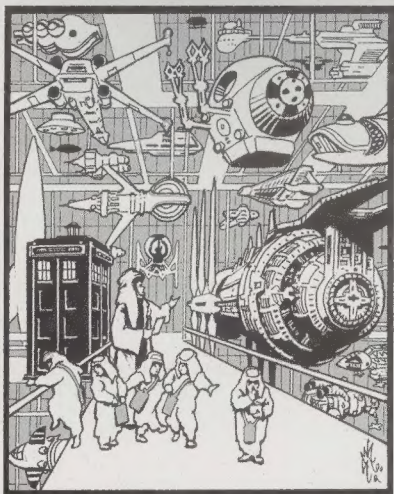
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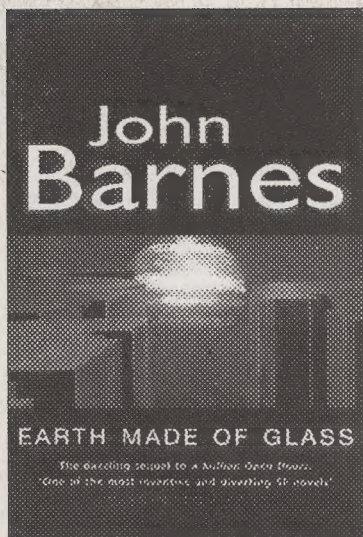
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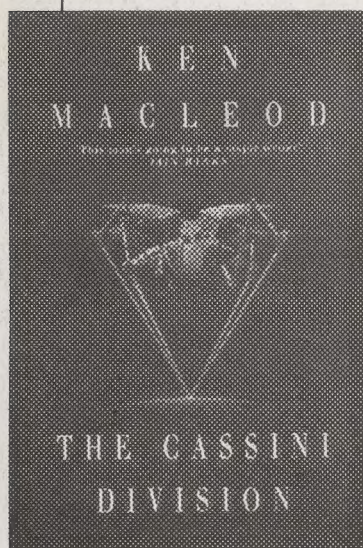
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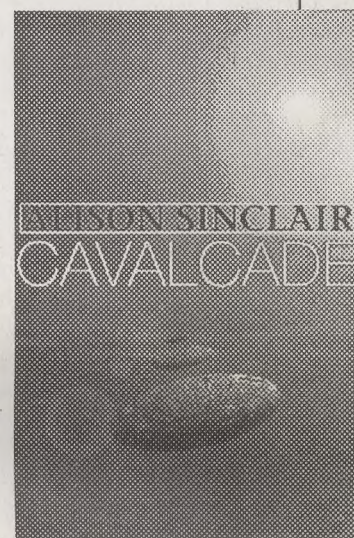
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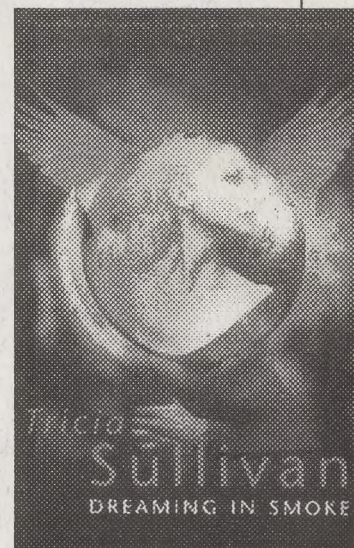
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